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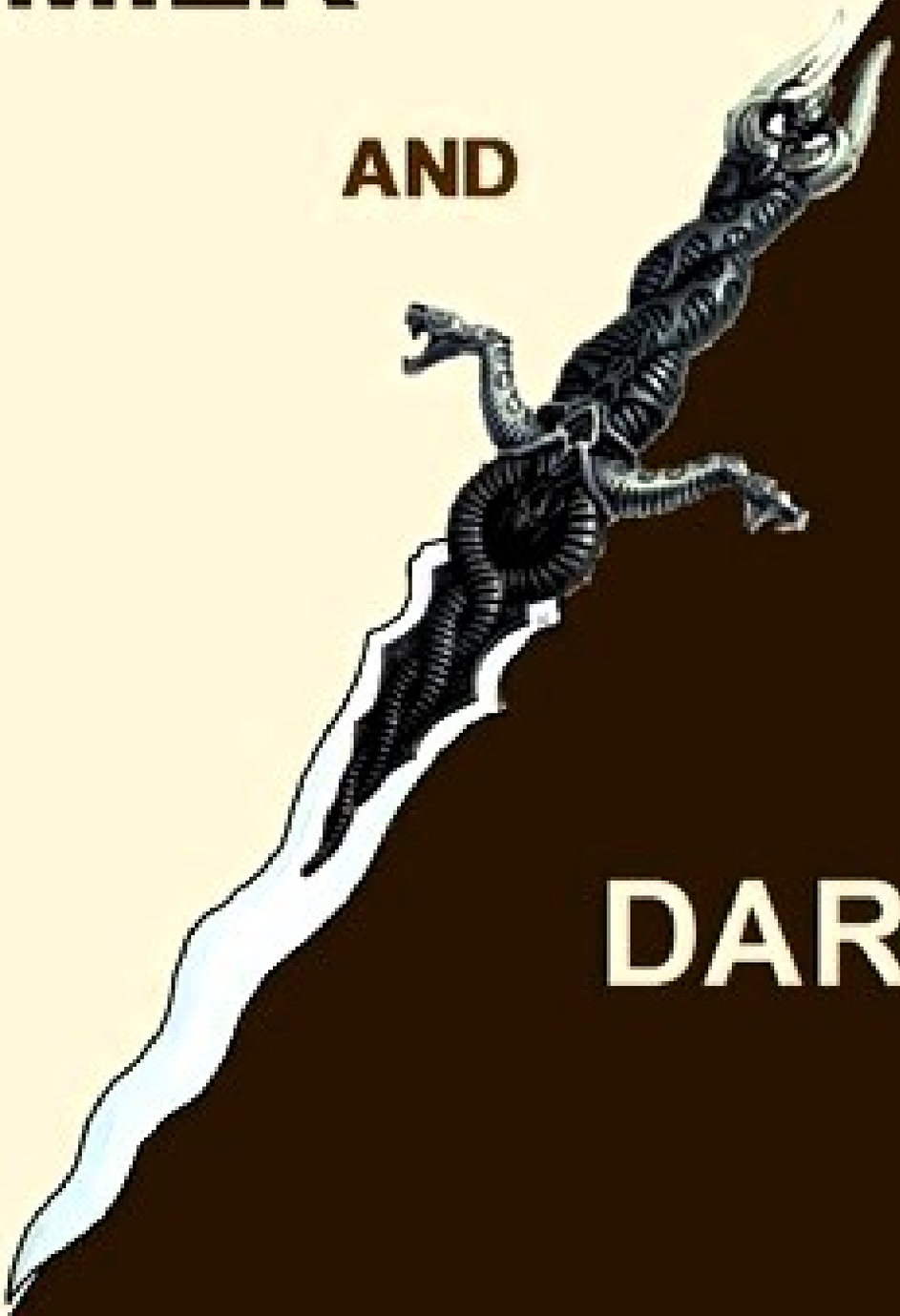

DARK

SUSIE GROOM-SMITH

By the same author:

Kaleidoscope (poetry)
Through the Telescope (poetry)
Face at the Window (poetry)

Susie Groom-Smith

MILK AND DARK

Milk and Dark
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‘Life is a like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get’ - Forrest Gump.

To all my readers, whoever you are, enjoy!

• • •

With special thanks to Rick West, my tutor, and to all my writing friends for the loan of their ears and the gift of their creative time.

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AS I SEE IT

Loved her. Always have. Never stopped. With her cool way of makin' a guy feel like he's the only one walking the earth. Raspberry crush lips, creamy skin that makes a peach feel rough, But,…lately…I've been thinking. She must be. She *is*. Having an affair, that is. Taken a lover. Well. that's how I see it. I know my wife so well. Too well, some people tell me. How *can* you know someone *too* well? I said to them. Oh, you can, they said. Take it from us, and these mates usually all wink at each other, conspiratorially, if you get me. Oh, you do? I see. Been there, have you? Ok. Looks as if yours truly is in a minority of one. They say, remember what breeds contempt? And I nod sagely, but still maintain I know her very, very well. Better than she knows herself, I sometimes tell her and we laugh. But I've noticed lately she never disagrees. I expect she would have said the same about me. Although, I'm not so sure about that. Actually, I *am* sure. Positive, in fact. There is 'stuff' that had happened to me way before I met Francesca that I would *never* want the poor bitch to know. Hey, you've been there too? The hand of time…and all that.

Let me reiterate. She is. Having an affair. She was never the same since she came back from that Aussie Outback holiday I booked for a treat. Maybe I unnerved her with all that unknown territory. She said it reminded her of a horror film she'd watched once and she kept looking back over her shoulder all the time. That sure unnerved *me*. Admittedly, it *was* bad planning but I reassured her my sense of direction was second to none and that I'd get her back to camp safely, no prob. Except, there was the time we almost ran out of fuel oh, *and* water, on the way to Ayers Rock. I swear to God, someone moved the goddam rock that day. She said, going round in concentric circles all day in the Devil's Dustbowl was not her idea of fun. That if she

saw one more bloody trail that led to sweet nowhere, she'd get out and walk, even if it took a week, as at least she could head in a straight line *towards* the blasted lump of Rock. And anyway, she had gone off the idea of looking at a pile of old red stone with not a shopping mall in sight for hundreds of searing Aussie miles, which, she, said were far longer than anyone else's miles, so why didn't we just go back to camp to lay in a darkened tent with cold compresses on our heads, until this giant furnace had cooled to temperatures something like manageable for normal human beings?

Thinking about it now, I suppose Fran did have a point. Frying an egg on the Discovery's bonnet was a distinct possibility and not one she said she cared to try. A lack of water made us both delirious with symptoms of dehydration so spending the next two days in the camp clinic didn't suit either of us. Well, I apologised. A lot, as I remember, but I don't think she would have been satisfied with anything less than certain parts of my body strung up to dry in the desert for vultures to peck on. Mistake. Could have happened to anyone…couldn't it?

It was shortly after the holiday that I began to notice changes in Fran. Too subtle for me, Graham, old boy, my brother Alistair said, when I explained what I was thinking. You're just imagining things. Get out there and give her a good time, yeh, buddy, and he would nudge-nudge wink-wink at me, and I knew it was useless talking to him. Changes such as? I hear you say. Ok. Changes like her never bein' around when I got in from work for instance. Yes, maybe a hoary old reason, but totally unheard of when we first married six years ago and anyhow, there were plenty more if I cared to look and think about them. I built it up in my mind until I thought it would all finally burst out of my aching head and splatter like a dark crimson river running down the walls. But it didn't. I held back and became adept at letting her think nothing bothered me

and we continued like this for a long time.

One day, I even decided to be romantic. Or so I hoped. I bought a big fat diamond, well, zirconia actually. I dropped it into a celebratory glass of Moet; hid it under hundreds of gassy bubbles but as I came back into the room, with chocolates I'd forgotten, I caught her swapping the ring over into *my* fluted glass with a strange tightness on her otherwise expressionless face. She never ever mentioned it and neither did I so that died a death in embryo. What was I supposed to do? She obviously thought I was trying to choke her. Nothing was ever said from that day to this.

Maybe I should have said something of my worries at the time and the outcome could have, should have, been so different. After the romantic incident, late was a word I became very familiar with. Late was what she was, most days. Always late back. And she never even bothered to think of a plausible reason that I, her poor old sod of a husband, dear old Graham born with wool already over his eyes, would swallow. At least she could have given me the respect of a real humdinger of a lie. It was always, 'traffic bad' or the other boring ones about 'working late' or an important 'extra meeting with the boss' after hours. I think you might know what I mean when I say I had my suspicions about the telephone too. Oh, yeh. *That* was a good one. A cliché but true.

She would always stop talking soon as I came into the room if she was on the phone. Change the subject, but it was always bloody obvious. Classic but true. I kept my cool on that score, too. And there was the way she kept taking sideways looks at me. Furtive glances.

I told my best mate Pete. He said I was probably mistaking sexy for furtive. He said he once did that 'til he and his wife Barbara talked it out together. Simple mistake, mate, he told me. Said once they'd talked, everything was fine. Well, more than just fine, know

what I mean buddy, nudge-nudge and he winked. He's ok, Pete. We've been mates since the world began. But Mr Pissed Off here, I was still not convinced. Fran was always distracted when we talked. Her eyes said everything and nothing. If I asked her a question about our conversation, she hadn't a clue what I'd been saying. That was the catalyst... I thought we were happy and obviously I was very wrong. She began staying out more and more, later and later, until she was often away for a weekend at a time or two nights in the week. Always the same old excuses. Work work work. You'd think she'd been running for President, or somethin'. Me. Good old nice guy, Gray. the old retainer dog. Well, she's thrown the ball for him once too often. 'Cos this time he refuses to bring it back anymore. I plan to lay a trap for her, well the pair of them, and they'll fall right in. I'm confident of it. I'm planning to lie low in my own attic and wait for them tonight. Fran thinks I'm away on business, on a Conference. And I know she will bring the jerk back here to *our* bed. God, no. No. I can't have that. Hell, no.

But, mind, I was only planning to see if I was right, you understand. Give them a scare. Well…wasn't I? Judge Homer O' Connor never saw it like that. Said the shiny rock in her champagne glass was 'clearly meant to do her harm.' And the Australian holiday? Knowingly taking a trip with 'insufficient water and gas supplies' in those conditions, when I had 'an unbroken record for always being meticulously organised,' was, in his opinion, another miserable failed attempt to 'endanger an innocent life'. And me? Did I want to die as well? He said maybe and anyway, I was of a far stronger constitution than she was. Er, questionable, your Honour. As for the 'attic plot,' I told the court *she* was waiting for *me* on the night in question, when I'd only been in my own home attempting to see for myself. Waiting behind the bedroom door she was, with a hellish heavy soap-stone

paper weight. She was that fast. Gashed my head open before I'd time to react. Blood? All over the white shag pile. She said she thought I was an intruder but I told the judge I knew she recognised me before she struck. I saw it in her eyes. You see, I knew her.

I know it'll be a hell-hole for her in there. All that crap she gave the Judge about *me* lunging at *her* on the bed first, wielding what looked to her then as a baseball bat. I ask you. What? Going in to my own bedroom? Come on. Anyhow, she got five years. GBH. Old Homer told her she was a very lucky lady he wasn't harder on her. Said he was in a good mood after being on vacation.

Ok ok, so it turned out she *was* sleeping alone, when I entered, er, excuse me, my *own* bedroom, but I just know the creep must have legged it over the balcony. Musta heard the bedroom door give that stupid dumb squeak I've been meanin' to fix for years. So where was *he* when she needed him? Whereas me, good old Graham, well, I'll be visiting soon as allowed, won't I? She needs me,…doesn't she? I'll wait as long as it takes. A bad bad mistake. I can remember her eyes staring over at me at the trial. Strange. I used to be able to read them. Not then. I hope mine signalled that I *really* loved her. Really, I did…didn't I?

"Who the hell is *that* now?" He spoke aloud and went to answer the door.

"Oh, it's you, Barbara. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Pete sent me round. Check you were ok. Said a woman's opinion would be good." And with that she sailed in past Graham and headed into the sitting room. He noticed she was clutching a bottle under her arm. Was that part of the treatment too? Ummm, well. could be…he pushed a sneaky thought away and substituted it for, I love my wife…don't I?"

When he entered the room, Barbara was reclining on the soft cream leather sofa, crossing her shapely legs,

flashing scarlet nails and patting the seat beside her. Graham stood still by the door, not moving for a moment. He walked across the Turkish rug. Heavy rain was tapping on the window, running down in long silver tears.

ABOVE SUSPICION

'She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah, She loves you…' wafted out from George's radio when he opened his door to the policewoman. A strong smell of polish and toilet-cleaner hit the air. He trailed ahead of the DC in over-sized brown check slippers.

"I was just going to collect my pension, officer. Anyhow, come in. I'll help if I can." He turned the volume down and plumped the one flat greasy cushion on the tiny settee.

George Miller spoke to the investigating officer, DC Victoria Crabtree the day after Sydney's partially decomposed body had been discovered in his flat. A post-mortem was planned later that day and DC Crabtree knew she had to gather any information as quickly as possible for the DI. He hadn't been in a great mood lately so everyone at the station was having to tip-toe past the tiger. George faced the DC in an upright faded tweed recliner, squinting over the top of his glasses, which were mended at one corner with sticking plaster.

"Flies, loads of 'em, everywhere and the smell, terrible it was, weather being so hot."

"When did you first notice this smell, Mr Miller?"

"About a week ago. Like something's going rotten I said to Mrs Gorzyski, downstairs. She reported the smell to the Police. Told 'em we'd kept knocking on the door, got no reply. We hadn't seen Syd for a while. Been there about two weeks you say? I feel guilty that it could `appen and nobody knew. Murdered, so I've heard."

DC Crabtree tried to interrupt but George was in full flow. She kept her notebook up to speed. A whistling sound startled her as George adjusted his hearing aid, still talking at the same time.

"What a world we live in, poor old Syd. Bit bad-tempered sometimes. To tell the truth, I've had the odd run-in with him myself. He got worked up over

something and nothing. Kept his wife Audrey in her place. She died last year. Not married long, so Mrs G downstairs tells me. Believe it was a shotgun wedding without the baby. Quite a bit younger than Syd she looked. Good on 'im I say. Saucy old devil. Wish I could do the same meself. Mind you, she looked like a flighty piece. Had a son from her first marriage. Mrs G will know *his* name."

"Can I ask when you last saw Mr Adams? Whether you've seen or heard anything suspicious at all lately?"

"About three weeks ago. He was coming in same time as me. We exchanged a good afternoon. He was wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. Never seen him so smart before, I can remember thinking that at the time. One other thing I *do* remember is hearing summat."

"Can you describe what it was you heard and when?"

"In the last month. Muffled voices and on another night, as I was going to bed, a couple of sort of …thuds I suppose I'd call them. Comin' from above. From Syd's place, I thought."

"Can you be a bit more specific?"

"I'm a bit deaf, see. They were talking loudly. Heavy footsteps like a herd of cows. It might have been his son, Roy. Visits Syd every few months. A bit of a barney going on, I'd say. The other noises happened a couple of weeks later. Perhaps I should have taken the trouble to go up there, see if he was ok, but it seemed like interfering. I mentioned it to Mrs G the next morning. She said *she'd* seen a woman going upstairs last night and heard a bell ring, then voices. One of them was Syd's."

DC Crabtree continued her careful note-taking. "Have you heard anything since then from the flat, or seen his son, Mr Roy Adams?"

"Seen Roy once lately, but not to speak to. Passed

me on the stairs that's all. He never speaks to anyone. Syd once told me he only ever shows up when he wants something. I heard from Mrs Gorzyski that Sydney was found dead in his bathroom. Tell you everything *she* will. Our unofficial neighbourhood watch. Only unofficial on account of she hasn't any net curtains. How exactly did he die, officer?" George leaned forward to hear the answer more clearly.

"Sorry, this is a Police matter so you'll appreciate I can't say. That will be for the Coroner's Court. I would offer you a lift to the Post Office but I've got others to interview."

"That's alright officer, I'll walk. Fresh air'll do me good. I don't go far these days."

Victoria finished her notes outside. A smell of urine, mixed with alcohol and cleaning fluid followed her as she made her way downstairs to number 4A.

Ewa Gorzyski wasn't too happy about seeing a police officer at the door, ever since two had come to their tiny flat in Poland when she was a little girl, terrified her Mother and taken her Father away. She reminded herself this was Brighton, England, a long time after the war and felt reassured to see, through her spy-hole, that the officer's face looked familiar. Nervously, the old lady opened her door, drew back the safety chain, and winced as a bolt of pain shot through her arthritic fingers. As DC Crabtree came in, the smell of this morning's bacon and last night's fried onions went out.

"See this door officer?" and she nodded towards the black graffiti. "That's what you get round 'ere. No surprise to *you*, eh? If I ever catch one of them, there's no telling what I might do. Never forget a face, I'm telling you!" and she slammed the door behind the DC to underline the threat. Not a lady to be messed about. Obviously had a good memory, despite her age. Noted. In the cramped sitting-room, Mrs Gorzyski swiped at a

mangy black cat with yesterday's paper. It jumped sulkily off the sagging floral settee. Ewa motioned DC Crabtree to sit down, whilst lowering herself painfully into an armchair. Rheumy pale eyes stared fixedly at her visitor.

"Terrible thing it is. I *do* remember a shocking smell. It was me as alerted you lot. But Syd, well, moody man *he* could be. George will vouch for that."

"You say moody. Can you tell me a bit more?"

As the DC spoke, the old lady looked quizzically at her for a few seconds before continuing.

"Sometimes he'd speak, sometimes he wouldn't. Could never say how he'd be from one day to the next. Same as his wife really. Second wife that is, Audrey. Barlowe before she met Syd. She passed away last year. They hadn't been married that long. Mystery how she died. Doctor's said it was the result of a bad fall brought on by a heart attack or vice versa. No-one was ever quite sure. First wife was Rose. Such a friendly soul. She was Roy's mother. Syd told me once that Roy never took to Audrey. Rose passed away a long time ago. No-one else would remember her. I'm the longest surviving resident here, you know. Not much gets past me!" Only the mouth smiled, her grey eyes kept their vigil.

Noted *and* underlined. The DC's shorthand continued. "And Audrey's son's name?"

Ewa's brow furrowed. "Not sure, off-hand, love, but I *can* tell you I saw Sydney a few weeks ago."

"Where was this?"

"In the lift, with a young couple I'd never clapped eyes on before. Right poker-faced *he* was and she was nervous as a kitten. Syd looked a bit on edge with them, I'd say. Would you like tea or coffee? I was just thinking, I'm sure I've seen your face, spoken to you before. It'll come to me later when I'm not trying, I expect! Does that ever happen to…"

DC Crabtree shifted on the slipping nylon covers, making notes. The DI had always approved of the

painstaking notes she made for him and said she was one of his most thorough serving officers. She didn't want *this* case to be any different. She interrupted the old lady.

"Yes, I know exactly what you mean. No drink, thanks anyway. Have you heard or seen anything else in the last few weeks?"

"You mean *suspicious*? No, except, now you ask, there was a woman on the stairs, late one night. I'd been out visiting my friend Saskia and this woman kept on going, up the stairs as I was letting myself in."

"Would you recognise her again?"

"Never forget a face, or a voice. Have a flair for them. Bottled blonde. About your height I suppose but in the highest heels I've seen for a while, skirt no longer than a pelmet. I didn't know where to look."

The DC took due note that Mrs Gorzyski had an excellent memory for detail if called upon as a witness in any court case.

"Thanks for your help. Tiddles can come back now."

As she let herself out, the DC was aware of the old lady's eye continuing to stare out through the spy hole for some moments. Suddenly, she re-opened the door and announced proudly, "Stephen. That's his name! Audrey's son. Stephen Barlowe. You see, I *knew* it would come to me. I'm still thinking about *your* face, I'll get there," and she finally locked the door and replaced the safety chain. Victoria was reminded of Eleanor Rigby. Something about teeth in a jar by the door.

Waiting at the entrance to Sanctuary House, outside Eddie Hanson's flat, she watched a taxi-driver loading a suitcase into the boot of a dark blue car, before pulling swiftly away from the kerb and heading off through late morning rush-hour traffic. Bars of weak sunlight slanted through the taxi window, allowing her to see that George Miller was the passenger. More notes.

Eddie Hanson stared through a crack in the door when the DC introduced herself. He was rubbing his red-rimmed eyes as he led her into the gloom. DC Crabtree tripped over a cracked leather floor cushion, just managing to avoid a pile of papers and a dirty mug as he opened the faded brown curtains. Grey light seeped in and highlighted a layer of dust on the table. A strong smell of cigarette smoke and stale sweat mixed with coffee grounds. She declined his offer of a cup.

"Who'd you say? That old geezer up the top? Topped 'imself has he? Sorry, shouldn't have said that should I? Haven't lived here long, you see, don't really know the cauli-tops upstairs. Oh, God, done it again! Had a hard night's day, if you follow my drift. Need my shut-eye."

He scratched dirty calloused fingers through greasy hair, belching as he swigged the last of his coffee dregs. Smoke drifted around, giving the room a veiled, almost ethereal feel. Victoria shivered, even though it wasn't cold.

She kept her notes running. "Have you seen anything, heard anything unusual lately?"

"I'm on nights. Bit of a ripe rotten egg smell coming from somewhere lately. Thought someone's rubbish never got collected. Bloody Council. Never see nobody for days on end. Been sleeping a lot. You just caught me. I'm usually in the sack by now. Must be your lucky day, darlin'. Mind you, I've only seen the old gent half a dozen times since I've been here. That's four months by the way. Hey, what do you say to a quiet drink tonight? Look like you could do with one."

The DI's face flashed in front of her, demanding results.

"Sorry, no offence, but professional duty and all that. Can't accept. If I can just ask whether you have cause for any suspicions regarding the death of Mr Adams in the upstairs flat, in the last month or so? Have you spoken to any strangers here in this same

period or remember the last time you saw him?"

Hanson yawned, gold fillings glowing like headlights in the dimly lit tunnel of his mouth. He stubbed his ciggy out in the empty stained mug.

"Saw him getting out of the lift three, maybe four weeks back, with another bloke. Think they got into a taxi. Mind you, I *do* remember they were talking about money. The younger bloke kept telling Syd to put his wallet away, saying it was all on him and it would soon be sorted out. Bet my Dad wishes I'd tell *him* that more often! Presumed it was the old fella's son. I could see the likeness," and he yawned even louder this time. "Anyhow, I'm dog tired if that's all. Gotta get me beauty sleep, eh? Offer of the drink's still on if you change your mind, Superintendent. How did he go, poor old sod or is it against the rules to tell me that as well?"

"Can't say until after the post-mortem and the investigation's completed. Thanks for your time, Mr Hanson. Apologies for keeping you up," and she picked her way carefully out through the detritus that was Eddie's scattered life.

"Oh, one more thing!" he shouted from the door, "Thought I should mention. Not sure how long ago, few weeks maybe, a woman was knocking on that geezer's door, old what's 'is face Adams, late one night. I heard her as I was going to my shift. Couldn't see much in the dark when I looked upstairs. Great legs mind! That much I *did* notice! Good as yours!"

He half-grinned through yellowing teeth. His mobile phone rang. Eddie began to chat earnestly and prompted by George Miller's Beatles tune, which had stuck in her mind all day, Victoria suddenly thought of the Nowhere Man…living in his nowhere land…making all his nowhere plans…She was jolted back to herself by a loud slam from Eddie's closing door.

At least he had made her smile when he'd promoted her. *And* given her some new information. Maybe not so much The Fool On The Hill after all.

In the entrance hall, she wound up her notes. Placing her notebook in the usual concealed inner pocket, DC Crabtree took some time back in the car to compose herself. She completed more crucial paper-work before she was satisfied that she was ready for the tricky bit. Seeing DI Tiger back at the station. She needn't have worried. His mood had changed like the weather, thank God. Victoria filed her reports of her interviews in the incident room, shouted, "Good night," to everyone and left at the end of a long day, to keep company with a well-chilled bottle of wine.

The phone rang.

"All OK? Any problems?"

"No real problems, just one or two loose ends."

"I'll have to leave that with you. As regards *my* job, I'm happy if you are. Arrangements as discussed. I'll be in touch. I'll send the rest of the fee on to you."

"Just make sure you do, Mr Barlowe."

The phone clicked and the line purred.

Standing outside Ewa Gorzyski's, Victoria rang the bell and waited. Once again, a grey eye looked through the monocular glass. Sound of the safety chain being slid off.

"What can I do for you? It's a bit late. Come in."

Mrs Gordyski turned to go in, muttering, "I know where I've seen your face. Actually, it was your voice that helped me remember."

DC Crabtree took out the silenced Walther PPK.

"And I've got something for you, Mrs Gorzyski."

One, then another dulled thud. Removing the silencer, she pocketed the gun safely.

"Sorry, Mrs G, I just couldn't take the chance," she half whispered, as disembodied black leather gloves closed the bathroom door. She left the flat silently as if moving through water.

Stinging rain pelted the roof of the DC's car, backing her, as she belted out, "Gimme money, that's

what I want…a lot of money…that's what I want…"

Deep blue darkness swallowed the car whole and the wind screamed through spinning tyres, down the long and winding road.

ALLEGROPHOBIA

Mrs Ingotsby was a lady with a phobia, amounting to paranoia. About being late. Unpunctuality. She wasn't sure if it had a name in the study of dreads and phobias. Her sister, Cecelia, said it was called allegrophobia but Elizabeth Ingotsby could never trust her scatty sister to get anything right and so she had never bothered her lightly permed head to actually check it out. Just presumed her sister wanted to impress. As for the phobia, Cecelia told her sister it was just an indulgence and she should 'pull herself together'. She also told Elizabeth that some 'brush-up' driving lessons would be a good idea for her and then she would not be so tied to Lionel's apron strings. Under her husband's control. Elizabeth hadn't looked at it like that before. Anyway, the old boy always said that he liked being her 'chauffeur' and they had laughed.

She had had a bad car accident many years ago and had sworn never to drive herself again, even though she still had a licence. And Lionel felt useful so that was that. But her dread had got worse and worse. She worried about missing flights, trains, appointments, anything where time was of the essence. Her husband, Lionel, had said countless times on the eve of a trip, 'Lizzy,' and that irritated her even before he'd said anything else as she had told him so often that she liked the name her parents had christened her with, 'Lizzy, my dear, what in hell's name does it matter if you're not quite on the dot at your age?' She resented that remark which he always trotted out, being six years her junior, and never letting her forget it. She thought he fancied that put him in the toy boy bracket, which always made him guffaw with pompous laughter when one of their friends teased him with the idea.

Elizabeth Ingotsby had an ever-mounting list of 'things' she despised about Lionel, her childhood

sweetheart, whose once endearing ways had long since cloyed to the point where she took every opportunity to get away on what she called her 'vitalising' breaks. She would go off for days, sometimes a month or more, leaving Lionel to spend his free time either pottering at home, doing useless jobs that she always had to re-do when she came home, or else at his Club in Town, boring his mate, old Harold and anyone else who would listen, with his Navy stories. Theirs was a 'symbiotic' marriage. They had lived like this for almost three decades and now Mrs Ingotsby was planning a 'vitaliser' to her daughter's in Florida and the old panic feelings had already begun to rise.

The problem was that Lionel seemed lately to delight even more in holding up progress to get out, adding tenfold to her existing fears. In fact, she would go so far as to say he revelled in her 'condition', as he would always think up an excuse to 'pop' back to 'check' something when she was standing ready to go at their ornate Regency front door. Yes, revel, that was the word. There was no other. Except perhaps infuriating. She even suspected that Lionel may have *caused* her problem. 'With his controlling ways, my dear,' her sister said. Elizabeth always hoped each time she returned from one of her trips that he might have changed but she was always disappointed. This three month trip to America was the highlight of her year and she wanted everything to be just perfect, especially her on-time arrival at the airport and subsequent flight details. Lionel had expressed a desire to accompany her at the start, but she had managed to paint such a perfect picture of the relaxing, easy time he could have between the house and his plush Town Club that he had finally agreed to stay at home after he had run her to the airport. A compromise he said, and she smiled.

'You really are so *very* good at keeping the home fires burning, Lilo' she told him, using her pet name for him that he liked when he popped into her bedroom.

'I will miss you terribly but I know all will be in your capable, strong hands,' and he had nodded sagely, adding that he would busy himself with cataloguing his extensive coin collection, which was housed in a secret strong room in the basement of their exclusive luxury mansion, Ingot Dene. He had had the strong room built especially to house all his valuable coins. It had a heavy door on it that was so thick it was virtually sound proof and he often told her it was like being in heaven down there, oh, and silent as the grave. They had laughed at that. You see, he told her, there were no extraneous noises or interruptions which suited him when he was trying to concentrate. It was situated almost directly behind and to the left of the main basement door which was handy, as he had pointed out, it meant just two clicks to the mechanism and they could both be closed together.

She smiled, nodding her approval and threw herself into her packing with renewed vigour. The flight time loomed ever nearer. When the day arrived, she found herself early one summer morning waiting in the gleaming Bentley, parked with great fuss and bother by Lionel, which had already begun her morbid train of thought that she was going to miss her flight. He had insisted on giving it 'just one more polish, dear,' and fiddled with every part of it six times, including backing it up and down the drive until she thought she might scream, when at last he had parked it in 'just the correct place for your convenience, my sweet, your luggage and all that.' Elizabeth was now drumming her highly polished freshly manicured scarlet nails on the dashboard and pursing her well-glossed ruby lips while she tried to calm herself down but those 'feelings' were getting worse. The seams on her tights were already crooked and her mohair cardigan was becoming irksomely itchy. She had grown tired of turning the radio on and off. Even her watch had chosen today to stop, as if it too had decided not to bother any longer.

She remembered there were spares in her bedside cabinet. Lionel had offered to get them for her in such a gratingly helpful way that she had succumbed, her optimistic side having risen to the top. Mistake, mistake, mistake.

Her blood pressure was climbing by the minute. She had long felt misunderstood in her desire to be early or at least on time. After all, it was manners not to be late. She had always been taught that by her parents. But she had always kept these things to herself. Why couldn't the damned old fool be on her side even just for *once* instead of revelling, yes, that word again which was so apt, in her discomfiture and worry. He really was …and she ran out of expletives in her mind as she watched him walk towards her wearing the all too familiar expression. One that said,' there's one more thing to do,' accompanied by the irritating smirk.

"Lionel!" she wound down the sparkling window and almost exploded, "it's time to go NOW. What in God's name are you doing? I'm going to miss the flight and then where will I be? Forget the bloody batteries. Oh, you really ARE the…" and she couldn't go on or she would have blown a fuse, one that was fizzing shorter and shorter by the second.

"Stop worrying, my dearest, you mustn't go upsetting yourself. We have oodles of time. Do your deep breathing as Cecelia told you and you'll be tickety boo. What was it you asked me to get. I've forgotten? Oh, that's it! No, don't worry. It's come back to me now. Get that watch going for you, dear. Lizzy, darling, leave it all to me," and he turned on his heel to go inside.

Lizzy. There he went again. And as for leave it all to him. Well, that is precisely what she dreaded. If she left it to him, she would miss this flight and the next one too. No. It really was too bad. She knew he was up to his old tricks, causing her to worry and flipping her into a nervous condition. He *knew* what it did to her. His coins, coins, coins. He had love affairs with Elizabeth, first *and*

second, Anne, not to mention Mary. His all time favourite though was a King James solid gold 5 guinea piece which he told her was worth £10,000. She had plans for that collection which she breathed to no-one, least of all Lionel. He thought she was a complete ignoramus about the collection but she had listened more carefully to what he had said to her than he realised. Even done a bit of her own research at the reference library. After all, what good were they moldering away down in that safe when she could be putting them to the use they were meant for. Lionel can't take them with him even if she strongly suspected he would like to. She had seen a beautiful shearling waterfall drape coat last week and the cost was that one measly little gold coin of his. And then she would think about all the rest.

Like the William and Mary 5 guinea coin. Another fabulous amount, he had told her. And she let her mind wander on what *that* one might buy. There was a pearl necklace in that exclusive jewellers up in Town. It was calling her name, as well as an effortlessly gorgeous gold charm bracelet oozing luxury. The possibilities were endless. After all, she had long had the feeling that he cared more about the wretched things than… Well, the amount of time he lavished on them. Five minutes. She decided to give the old goat five minutes and then she was going in there to tell him she would be driving herself to the airport, whatever he might say and that was that. Enough was enough. Lionel, she decided, had reached the end of the road. Either that or *she* had. It didn't seem to matter anymore. Her temperature had risen and her lips were tingling, as well as feeling numb at the same time. Her nerves were so jangled they were practically playing a tune. A painfully discordant one that threatened to send her into what Lionel had always referred to as one of her 'states'.

She must avoid that at all costs. She opened the

car door and wobbled uncertainly up the sweep of steps on her brand new wine-red shiny patent heeled shoes and in through the imposing part-open door. Inside the house, all was strangely quiet as she listened intently. No sound from anywhere. What was he playing at *this* time? Which little game was it to be? She had a suspicion but it could be the one when he proceeded to check every plug socket and switch at least twice all the way to the basement, muttering, 'yes, off off off' after each one; yes, that was a favourite. Or maybe it would be adjusting all the curtains to within a measured centimetre of positioning; or, and this was perhaps his most irritating, when he decided he would have to check through all of the paperwork they were taking on their trip to make doubly, quadruply sure that the passports were there, as he was always quite convinced they were not. Even when he had just clapped eyes on them two minutes previously. And all of these things with an annoying half-grin before he would sidle over and threaten to give her a slobbery kiss on the cheek but she always ducked in time.

It had at last begun to dawn on Mrs Ingotsby that it was actually Lionel who had a problem and when she suggested as much to him, preceded by a gentle, 'Lilo, dear, can we have a little chat? Coffee perhaps, in the conservatory, not long dear,' she was rebuffed totally when she voiced her concerns. Her husband told her that this was ripe coming from her of all people and would she kindly **not** throw stones from a glass-house. That if he *did* give an impression of being too careful it was probably because *her* panic was affecting *him*. And anyway, he finished, 'it's only because I care about you so very much that I want to do all I can to protect you.' What could she say? The matter was not mentioned again.

Now, which of all these possible checks could he be dragging out today in order to give her a breakdown about her due flight time departure? Or perhaps he had

devised a whole new tactic she had not endured before. Elizabeth walked through the silent house, the only noise her tapping heels on the expensive marble flooring, her coiffured waves bobbing side to side as she went, like a listening bird cocking its head from side to side. She quickened her pace when she remembered why she was in there, and began going from room to room. She checked her bedroom cabinet. The batteries were still in there so he hadn't even got there yet. She popped them in her bag and carried on. It was no good shouting. He was selectively deaf. The clock in the expansive hallway ticked remorselessly on. Nine twenty five. Her flight was due out at 1.30 and they had an hour and a half drive at least, and that was when the traffic was *not* held up. Which was hardly ever. As all this went round in her head, she dashed fast as her shoes would allow, closing each door behind her as she went with a loud bang. That would not please him, as he had probably carefully worked out the correct angle for each door to be open to. Well, **good,** and she banged the last ones in the downstairs rooms even harder. She really enjoyed that. Where the hell was the silly man? And then, she went to check in the basement, as they had lately been having trouble with that door swelling in its hinges ever since Lionel had painted it, so that it didn't always close as it should without an extra hard pull. She thought she had heard a noise just now when she listened carefully which would confirm her suspicion.

Things would be different around here from now on she had decided. And she would drive herself to the airport. Yes. Drive *herself.* Now there was a thought. It made her feel giddy when she began to see the possibilities of more independence. Mrs Ingotsby's face lost its look of disturbed distraction and she even gave herself an imaginary pat on the back for this new positivity. Yes. She felt this holiday was getting off to a good start already but hurry, or it won't happen. She

told herself, one last look. It had to be done or she would not be able to settle on the plane. Then her holiday could really begin. Come on, come on, old girl, she scolded herself on, clacking down the twelve step flight to the cellar. She held tightly to the cold brass handrail, after all we don't want any accidents *now*, do we?

In the basement, which also gave admittance to Lionel's precious walk-in strong room she pushed the door inwards. First click. Before giving the main basement door a hard pull towards her. Second click. She followed this by a further pull just to make sure. Well, this was the trick Lilo had taught her to do. Clever really. This way, it stayed in place and would not open again without the main house key, which she would carry with her in her bag. Before she left, she listened again intently which seemed to satisfy her then came back up the steps with the same due care and was about to let herself out at the front of the house, when she decided to make a phone call.

"Hello, Harold? This is Elizabeth Ingotsby here. Oh, yes, yes, thank you, I'm fine. I'm off to America on the next flight out of Heathrow to my daughter's."

"I know. Yes, yes it is, *so* exciting."

"Indeed Harold. Oh, I see. Does she?"

"Well, I'm sure you'll take Pamela one day, umm, yes."

"No, no, I'm ringing to say Lionel was going to tell you he will not be at the club as planned as he has decided to take time out relaxing at home for a few weeks without any interruptions. I'm sure you'll understand."

"Oh, yes, we all need it from time to time, don't we? He's been quite tired of late. I've left him resting now."

"Yes, exactly, that's absolutely right. Yes quite so."

"Certainly, yes, I will do. Yes, Yes. That's fine.

No. No. Yes. I will. And if you can just tell all his pals too, that would be lovely. Thank you so much."

"No, I think it best if he contacts you when he's ready. Lovely. Must dash."

"Goodbye Harold, yes, yes, love to Pamela too, goodbyeee."

Mrs Ingotsby replaced the red receiver carefully on its rest, which was also a fetish of her husbands, to be just so, and then suddenly picked it up again. With a triumphant smile on her face, she let it fall back with a pleasing rattle, before closing the front door firmly. She eased herself into the driving seat of the large Bentley, another of Lionel's pride and joys, with more confidence than she had anticipated, and let the automatic car do the rest. It wended its way down the drive and out onto the busy dual carriage way. She would be back briefly, she thought, after the long trip. She and her daughter would have had enough of each other by then…after that, well, the shearling coat floated into vision. She had also seen shoes to die for and there were…She stopped herself. Plenty of time for all that. The world, she thought, was a vast place, wasn't it? Such a *vast* place and she engaged cruise control. See. It wasn't as difficult as Lionel was always telling her to try and put her off. She and the Bentley moulded together like two contented cats and it almost seemed to purr as it ate up the miles to Heathrow. What was more, Mrs Ingotsby found that she didn't even mind if the worst happened and she missed her plane. A curious feeling that she hadn't had before and an enjoyable one she thought she could get used to. There were plenty more jets. She would just get the next available flight. She smiled inside.

They stood back and examined the windows. No signs of life.

"Two o'clock, Wednesday the 14th. That's what he

said."

"Yep. But it's no show, Pete. Come on. We'll set up another appointment."

"Anyone there? Hello? Hell...ooo? Mr Ingotsby?"

Two gentlemen in sharp pin stripe suits were knocking hard on the front door of Ingot Dene with the heavy brass lion knocker Lionel had polished until it reflected faces. Theirs were clean shaven with a dash of expensive aftershave wafting round. One peered through the letter box.

The shorter of the two said, "Seemed like a reliable sorta guy to me. Still, if he wants his coins valued he'll have to get back to us." They went back down the steps. His mate was turning round.

"Hold up there. Listen. Someone's coming to the door. We might still be in business." The door opened slowly to reveal Lionel dressed in casual slacks, a diamond patterned sweater and smoking a cheroot.

"Ah, yes. Good afternoon, gentlemen. Sorry about the delay but I'm busy. Can't hear a thing. Deafness you know. Yes, do go in. My wife never knows where I am. Can be handy, you know," and he grinned.

"Yes, go right in. I'm selling all my coin collection and putting this house on the market. We've started to rattle round in it nowadays. And my wife's never taken any interest in the coins. Hasn't got a clue what they're worth. Typical woman, eh? In fact, she'll be damn glad to see the back of them. Says I'm more in love with *them* than her! Even offered to put my bed down there a little while back!"

While the two men settled themselves on the chocolate leather sofa. Lionel continued,

"She's having a break at the moment. Bet she hasn't missed me either. No card, no phone calls, could be dead for all she knows eh? Wives, all the same. Now, let's have tea first before we get down to business and raise the dead in my strong room, eh?"

When the two men stared at him, Lionel guffawed

and added,

"Queens, dear boys, Queens. Anne, William, Mary! Who else, by jove?"

"Haven't you forgotten one, sir?"

"Dear me, have I?"

"Elizabeth?"

"Oh, so I have! Yes, yes. Now, green or Darjeeling?"

And they all chuckled as they raised their bone china tea cups.

CROSSING THE RUBICON

"Me Tarzan, you Jane! "You've got to see the funny side. What do you say, Sal?" Rob thumped his chest with one hand and made mock jungle sound effects.

"The best thing Jane can say about today is that *her* mobile worked. You didn't even bring yours, Tarzan."

They stared out through the leafy canopy, stuck fast in a fork of the ancient oak tree. Rob sensed Sally was about to pronounce, as she had that "look" he had seen before. He steeled himself.

"You've done it again."

"Done what?"

"Landed us in another fine mess. Remember the last time?"

"What last time?"

"You can't have forgotten already? When we were stuck down the pot-hole for a day and a night, like… *that* time. You said you knew the area like the back of your hand and it turned out you'd never even seen a pot-hole in your life!"

"Come on Sal, we got rescued, didn't we? I sorted it out, no problem."

"Sorted it out! Oh, yes, you did *that* alright. You, a sniffer dog, half of the Yorkshire Mountain Rescue team, plus paramedics, an ambulance and the hospital staff. Oh, *and* we'd been interviewed by every local and national newspaper. Yes, I suppose you sorted it out. Let me tell you now, it's retail therapy for me when, sorry, *if* I ever hit civilisation again. Read my lips, I've had enough Rob."

Sally shifted her weight gingerly on the unforgiving branch and gave a long sigh, riffling a few leaves close by.

"And here we are now, all because of a cougar. I

swear, if you read it in a story, you'd never believe it. A cougar, I ask you!"

"You can't blame *me* for that, Sal."

"Guess what, Tarzan? I do."

"It's an old West Country belief. There *is* one. Been seen in this very area. Truth is stranger than fiction you know."

"Maybe, but did we really have to come on a route march to the middle of nowhere, not a John Lewis in sight, just to prove a point?"

"I swear it's down there. I saw it, Sal, amber eyes staring up at us, just down there."

"Bet it was that mongrel dog we saw earlier. It looked lost. I know what you *said* you saw, that's why we're up here in this wretched tree. It's the only thing to do , you said, to get out of its way and me in my best jacket. Look! Ripped to shreds. And these walking shoes are exactly that, *not* climbing boots."

"Yeh, but look at it this way Sal, your jacket isn't half as ripped as it would have been if the cougar had got hold of it. They're *very* powerful animals, you know. Did you know they can…"

"Rob, stop the natural history lesson right there. I can manage without one right now. Unless you know whether cougars can climb trees."

"That's what I was just going to tell you. They can. Which is why we've had to climb as high as this. You're always saying we should try a new experience every day. Expand our horizons, fresh air and all that!"

"New experiences, yes! Impossible ones, no! And as for expanding horizons, we can't even *see* the horizon, in case you hadn't noticed. You know perfectly well I get vertigo, but, oh no, Mr 'Have-a-go-Henry' ignores all common sense suggestions like it'll be dark soon, and we're out in the middle of a god-forsaken nowhere place, so it could be a good idea to turn round. Typical! Just like your Dad, you are."

"Now let's not go there. Why bring him into it?"

"Why? Because *he's* pig-headed, stubborn and never listens to anyone either."

"OK then, while we're on the subject of family, I don't like the way your mother looks at *me* lately. Like something she's scraped off the bottom of her shoes."

"Don't mention scraping things off shoes to me. Your Dad's dog is the most disgusting creature. Always slobbering and leaving wretched little parcels on the front lawn. The damn thing's ruined two pairs of my best court shoes, not to mention our new white shag-pile. And the SMELL! I couldn't get rid of it for a week, so don't talk to me about *my* mother!"

In the meditative quiet, Rob peered through the foliage, searching for any sign that help was on the way but the rescue services didn't work *that* fast, he had to admit. Like the time he and his mates, before he met Sally, had taken a boat out and got lost in the fog. They'd ended up in the world's busiest shipping lane to be almost rammed by a tanker, which should surely have been able to avoid them, having radar and all that. If his memory served him correctly, all of this had happened without the coastguard even being aware of it. They didn't show up until the Lucky Lolita had drifted back towards the harbour, hours later, and two of his mates were suffering from hypothermia, vowing never to go on another of Rob's fishing trips as long as they lived. *They* had disappointed him as well. Not much enterprising spirit there. Sally's voice broke his train of thought.

"Did you hear a single word I just said? See the world from a different angle, *you* said. Well, forget angles. Trees are strictly for horizontal shade in summer. Oh, great, now it's starting to rain."

"Oh, bit of rain won't hurt. We're sheltered up here. Quite cosy really."

"Cosy? Up here? Call me old-fashioned, but I can think of better places to be cosy."

"Where's your spirit of adventure, Sal?"

"My spirit of adventure, as you call it, will now be found in buying my knickers at Ann Summers not Marks and Sparks and walking to work instead of taking the bus. Do I make myself quite clear, Edmund Hilary?"

"He's dead."

"Point made. That's where climbing things gets you."

"No, you see *he* was the man, one of the greatest explorers who…Oh never mind, Sal you just don't get it, do you?"

"Nope, sorry and I'm glad I don't. From now on, you go wherever the fancy takes you, without *me*. Oh, and your leg is bleeding, just so's you know. David Attenborough, you are not, Dora the explorer, *I* am not."

"Oh toughen up Sal. Positivity, that's what you need now."

"What, like that doe-eyed PA of yours, the one who's always hanging on your every word. 'Yes, Rob, no Rob, three bags full Rob, my husband doesn't understand me, Rob'…Oh yes, I've seen the two of you and she *positively* makes me sick."

"Now you're really being daft. She's just a kid, learning the ropes."

"Is she now? Well, I'll give her one to hang herself with."

"That's rich, Sal, how about the pimply, skinny lad, always hanging round the photocopier, bringing you double quarter-pounders with cheese and extra mayo *and* a gherkin, whenever you say, 'Ooh, I'm feeling hungry, and it's only 11 o'clock!'…

"Oh, pur-lease, do me a favour, Rob, and anyhow…"

"Yes?"

"You know I don't like gherkins."

During a long, considering silence, while Rob dabbed ineffectually with one hand at the cut on his leg, clinging to the branch with the other, Sally thought

about the biggest glass of wine in the world with her name on it, ready for when she'd finally managed to get out of this, er, experience. A blackbird suddenly flapped out through the leaves above them heading for a small patch of blue, causing Sally to jump so that she had to brace herself when a wobble threatened her sense of balance. The bird's darting flight, no doubt disturbed by their alien presence, reminded her just how near but how far the same freedom was for *them*. What's that Rob was saying now? Had she heard correctly?

"Actually, I think I'm beginning to enjoy it up here, Sal, away from the madding crowds and all that. Could be our new meditation technique, escape from work worries. Even market the idea. Tree-houses for the confused and stressed out. Call ourselves, "Sylvan Retreats." Course, we could spell it R e T R E E t s, get it? Although…"

Yes, she obviously *had* heard him right.

"Rob, let's get one thing straight. If anyone's confused or stressed out around here, it's probably because they're on a trip out with *you*. Tree houses are usually for kids. Does that lead you to any conclusions, I wonder?"

Sally continued mercilessly, aware that she had a captive audience and was going to make the most of it.

"If being fit or orienteering were God's intentions for the human race's enjoyment, I feel sure He would never have placed trees on this earth, made certain there were no such things as cougars and made especially sure He didn't put anyone on it who was going to torture his fellow man, or woman, by combining ALL of them in a day off work. Right?"

She swayed perilously close to the end of the branch, before adding,

"And I am getting the mother of all headaches as we speak, as well as pins and needles in extremities I never knew I had. Don't suppose we've got any aspirin? Oh silly me, I forgot, Tarzan's bag fell down with our

emergency kit hours ago." She swayed forwards alarmingly.

Rob managed to grab her arm to stop her plummeting twenty feet onto the ground below to join their medical bag, *and* the cougar, before the rescue team arrived and he had to apologise to them that there was only one who needed rescuing, instead of two. These were very busy people. They didn't have time to be messed around. God knows, *he* was well aware of that. He wriggled his fingers and toes and moved his head in a circle but this only gave him the same sickly feeling he had on that ill-fated boat trip on a choppy sea. He hadn't seen Pete or Tom since and wondered how they were doing. He thought he might get in touch, see what they could organise, until he recalled the look on Pete's wife's face in the hospital, when he'd said cheerio and suggested, " maybe another time?" Perhaps she thought he should have taken some grapes. No pleasing some people, his Dad had taught him that.

He realised he was beginning to feel very cold. Large drops of rain began to filter through into their eyrie, plashing onto the leaves, smelling sweet with damp. Sally wondered, for a split second, whether Rob might be right about trees de-stressing folk but the thought evaporated quickly with the raindrops. As lasers of iridescent sunlight pierced their arboreal seclusion, Sally pondered how the delicate leaf veins resembled the lines on the palm of her hand. The leaves had a luminosity as if lit from within. Studying her hand, while Rob picked disconsolately at the loose threads hanging round the cuff of his jacket, she remembered seeing Madame Rosa, in her gypsy caravan on Brighton pier last summer.

The silver bangle-laden clairvoyant, in her incense - filled gloom, had told Sally she would have a taste of the High Life soon. This was obviously what she had meant! The last thing Madame Rosa had told her was to be wary of any man who promised her this, as it

would only be temporary but after *that* the sky was the limit. Let's hope Rosa was not wrong there then!

"Did you hear that? Rob craned forward, frowning.

"What? If it's the mating call of a rabid, man-eating cougar I don't…"

"Just listen and stop rabbiting. There…that."

They both heard it this time, a siren wailing, faint at first, becoming louder.

"Yes, yes, YES! Well? Start shouting, Rob. You got us into this, oh and one more thing."

"What's that?"

"The wedding's off. Hear me Tarzan? Jane says so, it's official. You heard it first in this old tree! You were right, it *is* an inspiration! Cheers Rob!"And she raised an imaginary glass, as she sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow...for he's a…" then waved and flapped both arms erratically.

"Up here, hey, we're up here!" Her head swam. She saw two Robs.

Oh, the heaviness …Madame Rosa's face flashed past smiling, silver bangles staring from sunken black eye sockets…"and so say all of us, and so say…" The siren stopped and the birds began to sing.

FACE OFF

He was too macho to tell her he was scared. The very idea worried the s… out of him. Why? No concrete reason really. Something about her made him feel like that. Some women had that effect. His mate Nigel agreed and he should know. He sized up new talent quicker than you could get the first pint in. Still, he would put his 'I'm up for anything' mask on, face it out and it could be good for dining out on for a long time. They had seen the headline in a newspaper when he asked to join her in his crowded local on Friday evening. End of a long jangling week for him and he thought he hadn't seen *her* in there before. Better get cracking before Nige came in later. So he wasted no time making a date for Saturday, after an opening gambit about the eye-catching headline:

'ALLINGTON MANOR RE-OPENS
TO GHOST HUNTERS'

The place had been derelict for so long that this was a surprise. She threw down the gauntlet to go ghost-chasing. Made a change from watching Strictly with that last one. *She* never wanted to go anywhere lively. Still, and here he smiled when he realised there wasn't going to be much life in 'anybody' they might see at that creepy Spook House. She must have seen him looking amused because she asked, "Dare you then, Simon?" How did she know…? She must have heard a mate call his name earlier when he arrived.

"Who says I daren't? Sorry, I don't know your name?" He'd let himself down there, he thought. Nige would have found out her name before her wine glass touched the table. *And* any sisters, and mates she may have as-well.

"Louisa. I can tell, you know. It's written all over

your face. You don't fancy the idea. Mess your hair up, would it, Daddy Cool?" and she fixed him with a quizzical gaze before she smiled.

Right. That's it. You're on, he thought and told her so. Spooks? No such stuff. Over a few more tipples he decided she was not bad, not bad at all. Sorry, Nige old mate. Not yours *this* time. They planned to meet tomorrow night, later on. Give the ghoulies a chance to 'get going,' he joked. She seemed to warm to him when she decided he was going for the challenge. She liked men who faced their fears, she said, and he was pleased. She had obviously chosen to ignore his sceptical attitude.

"So, it's Shock, Rattle and Toll tomorrow," he laughed, as he walked her out to the taxi she'd booked. Under the neon light, he noticed her eyes were a shade of forget-me-not blue, like the ones he'd picked for his Gran as a kid.

And when he leaned over for a quick peck as she climbed in, he thought he smelt Turkish Delight. Well, a subtle scent of rose ottar that his Mum used to wear. Yeh, nice. The cab was swallowed up in blackness. She didn't look back.

A fog clung round the Manor like a velvet shawl the next night; loosely stitched with silver-threads of mist when they stood in the impressive sweep-round driveway which ran half a mile from the nearest main road. It deposited them, full frontage, at the heavy oaken door; the wood fossilised with age. Wood-worm pocked and sun-bleached, it boasted an evil griffin brass knocker. If this place had just re-opened, he thought, why was there a web wrapped round it? When a bat dipped by behind them, he jumped, as if expecting it to tangle in what little hair he had left. Their radar sometimes broke down he'd read and so he knocked even louder on the door. She followed him in, as his usual 'ladies first' was ignored after that bat incident.

As they went in, he heard a screech owl's cry in the distance, an eerie sound that made him glad to close the door on it. He knew the stage was set. No going back now, even if he wanted to, which he didn't. They stood and took in the Great Hall, complete with creaking, polished mahogany carved staircase, winding grandly up to open out onto a galleried landing above. Six closed doors ran along the landing. They stood for a moment, at the foot of the stairs, taking in both the grandeur and the spectral silence. He decided they were the only people on *this* tour tonight. Well, apart from his two mates the Knights, standing on the stairs halfway up, visors ajar, giving the impression of watching eyes wherever you stood. Those menacing steel suits, posing, frozen in time, together with gleaming spiked Samurai points above, made it *very* unnerving, but she carried on up the worn carpeted climb as if she hadn't even noticed them.

"What the hell was *that?" H*e swung round, and looked back.

"What's what?" she asked, somewhat mockingly, aware of his obvious discomfort.

"That!"

"What?"

"A cry. Yes, like a baby's. You *must* have heard it."

"No. It's probably a vixen out there. Or her cub."

He remained unconvinced but continued climbing as darkness descended slowly. 'He Reigns Victorious' was etched in crimson lettering on the stained glass above the hill at Calvary, Golgotha; and Mary collapsed at the Lord's feet

Sleet ran down the windows in elongated tears. He was sure he saw a ziz-zag of lightning and heard a crack of thunder. Goose-bumps territory. These old posh joints. A liability. How could anyone afford to run them? And he suddenly wanted to get out of there yet couldn't say why. They passed family coats of arms displayed on the flock-papered ochre walls, with a vicious-fanged

tiger leering on a rug below. A staircase promised secrets of 'A Lady's Boudoir-of-the-Day'. The huge stone-flagged kitchen sprawled underneath, with passageways spraying off to all parts of the House. They had been told there was a cellar, where priests used to hole-up and stay for weeks or months at a time. One of these was said to walk the corridors at night, holding a copy of the Holy Bible, reciting The Lord's Prayer as he went. Si prayed it wouldn't be tonight and silently crossed himself.

Where in hell's name had she got to? He had lost sight of her in his musings. She had completely disappeared. Oh, fantastic. One of those creeps was about to show itself and he was alone. Great! But no, thank God. She was just up ahead and he breathed easy again. They shuffled along in the red and yellow half-light from the wall lamps and he followed her as the passageway narrowed down to single file. Why doesn't somebody else appear to look round, for Pete's sake? he asked himself. Maybe they are ahead and started at ten o'clock instead of eleven, as *they* had, the last visitors of the day. Worn stone steps spiralled up in front of them, hollowed out on each tread by…well, many, many people; he'd leave it at that.

At the top of the steps they sat for a while outside the Lady's-bed-chamber and chilled each other with shared Tales of the Unexpected. A high wind screamed, scraping the vines on the panes. One particularly strong gust, on the ground floor, slammed a door shut. She looked impressed when he ignored it. They retraced their steps to look in the Great Dining Room, with its history of a previous Lady who sometimes sat by the inglenook waiting for the return of her dead baby daughter. Simon felt brave enough to go ahead by now and they crept along quietly together, almost on tiptoe. Out of respect, maybe? Or was it for fear of waking the …? It just *felt* appropriate. Beats watching TV, he told her, as they wandered along examining the wall art.

One of them was an oil painting of a stunning young woman gazing down at him in midnight silk and lace brocade, with glowing shoulders, long ringlets of a ripe wheaten shade and piercing ice blue forget-me-not eyes. You don't forget *that* shade in a hurry.

He called back, "Hey, darlin' see *this* portrait ? She looks exactly like…"

And as he turned round, he realised she was nowhere to be seen. When he looked back at the picture, he read in gilded letters,

'Louisa Elizabeth May De Lyon
1865-1890'

From deep in the bowels of the Manor, a tiny cry penetrated the palpable cloaking silence. It was so faint he couldn't even be sure he *had* heard it. A sudden flash of lightning lit up those forget-me-nots on the wall as their stare drilled through him. A sweet fragrance wafted by. Ottar of rose.

FORTUNE TELLER?

The tarot card of *'Death'* was placed in front of Barbara Leyton and a sharp intake of breath signalled her alarm as she saw that this was followed closely by the *'Devil'* card.

"A distinctly ominous card," said Martha, the tarot reader, in her soft Irish drawl, "reflecting what can happen if we let some of our inward qualities such as sexual impulses, selfishness or the urge to wield power, get out of control."

Barbara glanced quickly at Martha, but her features were difficult to see in the half-light of the tiny room, so it was hard to tell exactly what she was thinking. Martha's translucent skin, lit from behind with its heavy make-up, gave the appearance of an old time movie star. Her hair hung down like curtains, partially obscuring her face. She was wearing a red silk blouse, with fluted bell-like sleeves, which rustled each time she laid down a card. Large gold hoop earrings dangled from her ears, and were complimented by eight gold rings and charm bracelets, that rattled on her wrists.

Martha's room smelled strangely of sandalwood and patchouli oils, reminding Barbara of an old great-aunt who had a kiss as cold as a mortuary slab. The walls were decorated with a deep, rich-red, gold-embossed flock wallpaper, reminiscent, Barbara thought, of her local Indian Restaurant. The room was only sparsely furnished with a small folding table, two upright oak chairs, and an old mahogany bookcase, all placed on top of a threadbare rug, with a fading Persian pattern. On the table beside Martha was a pink painted glass lamp, which had a long beaded fringe made from tiny coloured glass crystals. These cast strange purple dancing shadows on her face and the walls. The whole room had a feeling of unreality with its strange musky

smell and heavily draped, midnight blue, velvet curtains, insulating it from the outside world.

"A warning," continued Martha, "Against giving way to base impulses, the darker side of our nature."

Barbara held her nerve, as the tarot reader placed the final card on the table, and began to take heart when Martha told her it was the *'Wheel of Fortune,'* usually a fortunate card, implying that destiny will work itself out positively, a sign that change is on the way. She was about to heave a sigh of relief when she realised that the tarot reader's voice was still coming to her from what seemed like a long way off.

"However, Mrs Leyton, the *'Wheel of Fortune'* which we see here on this spread of the tree of life is showing itself in reverse, which is quite unusual in my experience."

"So, what does that mean?" queried Barbara, already dreading what she was about to hear, but trying her best to sound calm and collected.

Martha, Barbara's recently chosen tarot reader from the local Post Office window, quietly explained that the reversal meant ill-luck, decline, adversity and changes for the worse. Barbara remained silent for a moment or two, whilst she considered Martha's words.

"Are you alright, Mrs Leyton?" asked Martha softly.

"So what do you think this means for me? It all sounds like very bad news."

"We-e-ll" said Martha hesitantly, "Perhaps there is something going on in your life that you need to consider changing before it destroys you, and you must act before it is too late. Think about it in your own time, but don't delay."

A few minutes later Barbara had left Martha's flat, after parting with a sum of money she could ill afford, and started her journey back home up the busy Bayswater Road, in the gathering gloom of a grimy November evening. She drew her cape more tightly

around her shoulders, comforting herself with the thought that at least Jessie, her dog, would greet her with enthusiasm when she got home, but despite this, she was still wearing an anxious expression and had the same feeling of distinct unease she had felt minutes earlier when clattering down the steep and narrow flight of wooden stairs from the tarot reader's dimly lit, cramped flat. Her eyes gradually adjusted to the bright street lights. A bone-chilling rain began to fall and she hurried on through the pushing, jostling late night shoppers.

Oh hell, I hate these dark winter evenings.

A passing number 17 bus filled with expressionless, staring, grey faces sped by, splashing her already damp, new high-heeled shoes.

"Taxi! Taxi!" she yelled, waving her arms wildly in the direction of one she could see fast-approaching on her near side.

Opening the door, she sank gratefully onto the soft leather seat, and gave her instructions to the driver, then leaning back, let her mind wander over the events of the last few days.

Barbara began to wonder if the tarot reader's words could be a dire warning about her affair with Alan, her best friend Ruth's husband, which had been going on over the last year. It occurred to her that for the past six months this 'darker side of her nature' with all of its so-called 'base impulses,' had perhaps been going a bit too smoothly. All those late night 'office assignations,' when Ruth, poor bitch, had thought Alan was working late. And what about Alan's so-called 'conferences' at various European destinations, especially the one in Paris. Barbara felt again a surge of excitement run up and down her spine, when she remembered herself with Alan in that sumptuous hotel in the Champs Elysees, with its gold faucets in the marbled bathroom, and the latest all-singing, all-dancing whirlpool bath, not to mention when they had

snuggled up together in those hot Turkish towels left by that polite little French maid, after their session in the warm Jacuzzi.

She was brought swiftly back to reality when the taxi swerved to avoid a jay-walking pedestrian, and then ground to a halt in a long queue at traffic lights.

Barbara started to feel wracked by guilt – hitherto an alien response to her. As she thought about that evening's revelations she almost wished she had never taken the decision to seek a reading. After all, how reliable did she really think this Martha woman was? She had only noticed her ad recently in the local shop, following a conversation with Ruth the previous week. Maybe Ruth had been right to pooh-pooh all of these so-called 'Mystic Megs', as a lot of old baloney.

Barbara thought back to the evening of the girlie night in, with Ruth, over a couple of bottles of wine. Although Ruth was Barbara's best friend, they were opposites in many ways. Whereas Barbara was auburn-haired, and petite, Ruth was taller, slim and blonde. Barbara liked to use make-up, but envied Ruth's more natural look, which she achieved with only minimal help from the cosmetic counter.

That particular evening, half way into the second bottle, Barbara had suddenly laughed, "Let me look at the wine lees in the bottom of your glass, Ruth. I might be able to predict your future."

"What? Are you one of those – what do you call them – clairvoyants then?" giggled Ruth. "Never mind looking into the bottom of an empty glass - fill 'em up again, there's a good girl Barb!"

"Seriously though," she continued. "I forgot, you really *do* believe in all that stuff about palms and crystal balls."

"Yes, I do," said Barbara. "And actually, now that you mention it, I've been thinking about going to see a 'Mystic Meg' as you call them."

"Really, but, why?"

"Well I feel I need to know where my life's going. Don't you ever feel like that?"

"Not really, oh well, each to her own, I suppose. I've nothing against them. In fact I noticed an advert, only yesterday, in the local Post Office – someone who reads the cards, I think it was."

"Oh yes, tarot cards," Barbara interrupted. "They sound very interesting. But, there are so many other ways of predicting, mind you, and that's only one of them. I'm not sure, what should I go for…"and here she took a deep breath before reciting, "Graphology, Phrenology, Numerology…"

"Hey, stop right there," sighed Ruth, "too many 'ologies' for me. Sounds impressive, but probably a load of rubbish."

"That's not the half of them," Barbara continued. "I haven't started yet. Never mind the 'ologies,' how about 'mancies.' There's Catoptromancy, Geomancy, Aeromancy, Hydromancy."

"Whatever is Catoptromancy? Ruth spluttered into her glass of wine." I'm surprised you can pronounce it after a bottle of wine. You can't have drunk enough! Anyway, I've never heard of it."

"If you really want to know, I can tell you. It's mirror gazing or scrying, used by the Ancient Chinese and in the Middle Ages. Catoptromancers exposed their mirrors to the lunar rays, then looked at the reflection of the moonlight in the glass to make predictions," said Barbara.

"Thanks for that Barbara, I'll have a go myself next time there's a full moon."

Barbara topped up the wine glasses, and both she and Ruth sank back onto the sofa.

"Maybe I should stick to that advert you saw in the local Post Office," said Barbara. "That sounds easiest. Decision made. I'll let you know how I get on. Cheers!"

Barbara's taxi finally rolled up outside her front door. After quickly paying the fare, she fumbled for her

keys and climbed the stone steps up to the Victorian front door. She let herself into the hall, and was greeted instantly by Jessie, a large, friendly Golden Labrador, which jumped up all around her, as she made her way up the stairs to change. Five minutes later, Barbara re-appeared from her bedroom, and was making her way back downstairs when Jessie hurtled past, knocking Barbara's legs from under her. She fell backwards, and for one brief moment seemed suspended in mid-air and time, as she realised she was powerless to stop herself falling. In that flashback moment, she seemed to hear the tarot reader's warning before she felt a sharp heavy blow to the back of her head.

Later that same day, Ruth was sitting quietly at home in the lounge, sipping tea, when she heard the front door open, and Alan appeared, looking distraught and distinctly pale, followed closely by Richard Leyton, Barbara's husband.

"Before you say anything Ruth," announced Alan, "I've got some terrible news. I'll come straight to the point. Barbara has had an accident. She's fallen downstairs, hit her head, and well there's no easy way to say this, but…she's dead."

Ruth got up, and stared at Alan, a look of panic in her eyes, a realisation dawning that her scepticism of fortune telling might have been seriously misplaced. Could this be a gift she had possessed all her life? Then she managed to pull herself together, before stepping forward to throw herself into Alan's arms, blurting out "Oh my God, this is such awful news. What a shock! I can't believe this. Oh God, poor Richard."

That evening, Ruth was upstairs, tidying the bedroom.

Destiny IS working itself out positively, and a change is CERTAINLY on the way, just rather earlier than I could possibly have hoped for.

She placed her make-up bag, a long dark wig, and a pack of tarot cards into her dressing table drawer,

enjoying for a few seconds longer this new feeling of empowerment, before quietly closing it and going back downstairs.

HOMEWARD BOUND

James Miller grabbed his briefcase from his desk, sank the last dregs of a, by now, very cold coffee and started off towards the lift. People packed together like battery hens in a box dropped six floors to freedom, and escaped onto the street to be swallowed whole by the jostling crocodile of the crowd, mobiles clamped to their ears – meaningless conversations fluttering past his head.

James glanced at his watch, 4.56 p.m., only 19 minutes to get to the station. He cursed himself for having that chat with Tony from Accounts in an eight-minute too long tea-break. Tony was always telling him that he 'took life too seriously,' and to 'chill-out' more. Oh modern sayings! They always irritated him, and he was never quite sure exactly what they meant. Yes, James always had taken life seriously – after all a decimal point in the wrong place could mean life-changing success or failure for some poor blighter, so yes, life was a serious business.

He began to feel the claustrophobic pressure of the busy street coming in on him. He thought of his trips to New York where the sun never shone at the bottom of those vertical concrete and glass canyons, and hurried on becoming increasingly agitated. He saw steely-grey faces in a futuristic landscape, punctuated by the flash of red and green controlling traffic lights, all attempting to drive anywhere, from somewhere to nowhere. The rigid grey walls of commerce competing with each other for a piece of blue sky, the city felt almost like a prison to James, these days – within its walls he had served almost forty years with no promise of parole for at least another two years. But even then, he wondered, how was his wife Pam going to feel about him 'cluttering' up the house, as she'd called it, when they'd talked about his retirement? He'd try not to 'get

under her feet' but it was going to be difficult as she was one of those omnipresent, all-seeing women – still, time would tell. Perhaps they could spend some time looking at all the palaces, cathedrals, museums and art galleries that he normally hurried past on the way to work – even take in a show or two. Sounded good – he was encouraged to break into a slow trot, but started to feel more and more tired as he neared the central station. Tony's words came back to him – 'not so serious James – chill out – there's always another train.' He made one final dash for the station concourse, down a steep flight of stairs, through a dimly-lit smelly underpass, up another flight of stairs and onto platform 4. He could see the train guard begin to think about using his whistle as it was spot on time to leave, so he jumped on board quickly, sank gratefully into the nearest seat before the train lurched and whined out of the station. As the doors closed, he thought he could smell the unique combination of burning coal, steam and smut and spotted the 'Orient Express' on platform 2, as his own train began to eat up the miles towards Brighton. Yes, that was another idea for himself and Pam – they could take a trip on the 'Orient Express' when he retired – when he retired – when he retired – he began to drift off as he closed his tired eyes and went back to the clickety-clack of the bygone trains of his lost youth.

"Jimmy Miller! Jimmy Miller! Hey there, hang on Dusty, it's me." A memory of a grimy, freckled face with curly red hair came slowly back to him through the steam of his memory. He remembered those happy boyhood times with his friend Charlie Robson in his beloved Somerset, best friend golden sunshine days of conkers on strings secretly baked in the oven first, stamp collecting and leaky biros left in pockets with pieces of string. Playing bows and arrows in cowboys and Indians and free-wheeling down the lane on bicycles, feet up on the handle-bars. What days! Forget computer games, videos and karaoke, James was back

in the days of firing cap guns, scrumping apples and collecting Matchbox and dinky toys. Vivid memories flooded back of wearing short trousers so cold in winter, scabby scraped knees and long grey socks held up with elastic garters. Charlie's garters had always been badly knotted and allowed one or both socks to slither down his leg like a wrinkled elephant's trunk. But no-one cared – they were having fun. James had always been a 'deep thinker' as his mother put it, and his friend Pete had called him a 'right worriter,' but all his friends had understood him and cheered him along.

He remembered that terrible sadness he had felt when his pal Charlie had died – they were both only 13 – a loneliness which went beyond words. Poor old Charlie. You would never have died if only I had been there to save you from the fire. You took one too many risks with that box of fireworks – just like you. I can smell the smoke now and see the blackened windows of your garden shed. I knew I was too late even though I ran all the way as fast as I could. I miss your laugh, your jokes, climbing trees, playing hide and seek in the cornfields and the go-kart races we had.

As the train pulled into Preston Park station, James forced his eyes open and thought 'Why do I feel so exhausted?" The train re-started. He closed his eyes again, the weariness over-taking him.

'Jimmy Miller! Dusty Miller! Jimmy!' James gave a start and strained to see through closed eyes. Suddenly, he grinned, *'Hi, over here! I can see you Charlie Robson, I can see you. Come on – race you to the next orchard!'*

The man in the seat next to James Miller pulled the Communications cord, and had to explain to the guard that, "One minute the fellow was asleep on the seat next to me, then he sat bolt upright, shouted something about a "Charlie Robson" I think it was, smiled into space, then he fell onto my shoulder. No sign of life you know. Oh he's dead alright. But I tell you

what – wherever he is now – he's very happy – just look at his face."

Oh yes, James Miller was happy now – happier than he had been for a long time and more at peace now than for many years.

IGNITED

The toothless gaping mouth opened in front of him, dusty nettles growing round the entrance like a macabre face grinning through a beard. A real stinger of a beard. Greg peered into the ink interior, where the weed-throttled path wandered through the tunnel under the ancient railroad tracks. The early evening light dimmed and decomposed as it telescoped away into the distance, becoming non-existent in shadow, giving way to a blind bend of hateful darkness. If he listened hard, he could just hear a steady drip off the slime-lichened walls onto the tunnel floor, where water seeped along the track, threatening to take down an unwary walker on the greasy cracked cobbles. Gramps Henry had told him some story years back but he was always messin' on. His Ma told him to ignore him if he got too scary. And he usually had.

A putrid smell, mixed with his own fear, caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand up. Sudden droplets of sweat slid down his back, soaked his sweat-shirt until it stuck like a waxy onion skin. His head ached and began to throb with the fever. Nothing for it. He was so late, this seemed to be the quick way, bein' as his Ma and Pa didn't hold with unpunctuality. In fact, he may still get a beating even if he took *this* way through from his friend Scoot's, back down there on Grand Rock Turn-pike.

Black as the back of his Gramp's deep cellar. That's how it looked in there. Greg took a coupla steps inside and yelled like his much younger brother Alex would have done. 'Hey...hey, ee…ey…ee...hey…eee' echoed round the entombing loneliness.

Ok. ok, time to rock, not hang back, and he pushed his jelly legs into motion, cursing himself all the time for bein' so chicken. Soon be through. What in hell's name could go wrong? A bat swooped in above his

head, almost clipping his sticky matted hair, disappearing ahead in a soundless arc.

What the…He fell back on his heels, about to turn and high-tail it round the long way, until his nerves unjangled and he eased himself into the sombre shadows. As he walked, he whistled, but quickly thought better of it, as the sound bounced back. The gloom, with its smell like mouldy old mushrooms his Ma had once thrown out, wrapped itself round him like a suffocating blanket. He shook a little as it grew colder the further he went in. He turned round to find the entrance to the tunnel had shrunk and was rapidly diminishing in size all the time. The slithery walls were squeezing in on him, or so it felt. He put a hand out to touch and see if it was true. Just an illusion. But the nasty chill slime-green shocked him. Soon, it would be black as the Ace of Clubs, both in front and behind.

What was the saying, 'not seeing a hand in front of your face,' well, he could vouch for that now. There was only a pin-point of light when he looked back and no light yet from the other end. He shuffled on toward a promise of freedom and daylight. How he took those for granted on a normal walk. Not anymore. He vowed never to be so late again. Get his act together in future. Oh, God, if there *was* a future. A feeling of sweaty confusion overtook him. He thought it must be panic or influenza, causing him to hallucinate and quicken his steps. It felt like a very alien place. Everything looked fuzzy, unreal. Dark shapes merged into one, all the colour drained out as if he was half blind, disoriented, groping for his bedroom door during a childhood nightmare. His throat hurt like he was chewing pins.

Why was it, he wondered, whenever you walked down a narrow path, it felt like footsteps were following? It had happened to him before in Squeeze Gut Alley where Gramps lived. And it was there when you went upstairs too. Something behind, not so much a ghost more a 'feeling', made you want to look round, then whiz

up the last steps, dash into the bedroom, and close the door fast. Strange. And hows about rats? Now there was a *real* dread. So far, no sign but who knows. There was a slight bend coming up before the tunnel should eventually come out into an almost empty field at the bottom of Grabb Hill. The field with the remains of an old farmhouse in it. He and Scoot had played around there, a chilled place even in the heat. Over that hill was home. He kept repeating it to himself to keep on track. Oh, God, light and fresh air.

Then he remembered. Yes, light, light; he had been lighting a fire today at Scoots, before the feverish sweats started. *His* Ma and Pa allowed fires, away from the back of the disused sheds, burning old furniture and garden stuff. So he had pocketed the couple of matches they had left and said he'd better go, it felt like he was starting with flu and anyway, look at the goddam time.

Greg felt for the matches. Yes. Still there. A bit of light might help. He had never liked the dark as a kid. Never knew why. Some kids used to laugh at him and call him Mom's yella boy. For him, the Bogeyman had really existed and if He didn't live under a bed, then maybe He lived in here. Greg came out in goose-bumps as he started to sing, hesitantly, 'Lead Kindly Light,' a song his Gramps Henry had taught him and his brother, and at the end, he substituted Amen for a loud 'Hallelujah' so as to sound Big. The echo of that last affirmation, oo, oooo,..ah…ah…ah…scared him so much he shook for a few moments.

Why the hell couldn't he meet a neighbour coming the other way, or even a regular guy or two going this way, if they caught up? On the other hand maybe not. His Pa said there were a few uncouth youths round this parta town that you'd rather not meet in the dark anywhere. He said their folks had the manners of desert coyotes and the ways of a buncha down-town renegades, and the lotta them should be locked up. Oh, God…ok, ok. Now stop all that. He inched along in what was by

now Grim Cellar hole. Was it time for the match to help him? He knew for certain there were only two left in the box. He stopped warily, affording himself only a quick peek round, before with a shaky hand he struck the match. It illuminated with a sickly yellow light right in front of his tallow-white face, and made a ghastly shadow loom on the walls. As soon as the match struck the box, an unholy wailing hit the air, followed by screams guaranteed to unhinge anyone who heard them. And just as suddenly as Greg had struck the match, he felt a fetid wind breathe past and extinguish it. For a full minute, or what felt more like a lifetime, Greg's legs threatened to crumble under him. He was starting to sink down. He summoned every bit of courage and yelled,

"Who oo…the hell are yoo…oooo?" The horrific screams continued. The sound amplified in his head in the confined space until he thought his skull would split. He put his hands over his ears but it made no difference. They felt like they were filling with razors and tin-tacks, all vying to slice out his ear-drums.

"Come on…stop messin' with my head who…oo ever you are. Yoo…ooo don't scare meee…eeee."

He could stand it no longer. He was about to light the last match to take a better look but suddenly stuffed the box in his pocket and started running like a buncha rabid dogs were chasing up behind him. His legs gained speed and strength from somewhere. The screams gradually faded and he saw a purple stain of fast-fading light ahead. Once or twice he slipped over. The tunnel was bumpy and the smell of rank air choked him. As he turned a slight bend, the light spot got bigger and his panic smaller. Weeds grabbed at his legs, sprouting out of the walls like spiders' legs, crawling over him. Something fell off the low roof onto his head and he flailed at it with both arms, to discover it was a large snail which had chosen that moment to dry up and drop to the floor. He scrunched on it with his shoe and winced

as the slug-like body spread on his sole.

As he ran toward the light, the contents of his pocket spilled out. No time to mess with that. He was finally able to run into the evening air, gulping it into his lungs, keeping his legs going, across the field, up the incline, past the ruined farmhouse, across another piece of brown uncultivated land. Finally, he threw himself, gasping, into his lighted kitchen, where there was a smell of baking. Trembling with relief for the 'normalness', he splashed his face with cold water at the sink. At the window, he waved to where his parents were bedding and watering the animals for the night. They appeared satisfied that they had clapped eyes on him at last, just smiled and carried on. Explanations? Later. There was something he had to do before that. He found just enough energy to go up the ladder to the spare room where all the family 'stuff' was kept.

He looked through the piles of papers, books and paraphernalia until he got the one he wanted in a race to find what was eating into his mind. By now, Greg hoped he could find a clue to what had just happened to him. That glimmer of a tale Henry once told him was nagging at him. Things fell all over the floor, slid around the table but not *the* one. Oh, God, where the hell…he was still traumatised and his fever was worsening.

Then, at the very bottom of the last pile there it was. His Gramps' scrap cuttings album he'd kept for most of his life. Greg teased it out and began leafing through, trying not to rip the dry yellowed paper that was threatening to crumble. For a long time he found nothing and when he had almost given up, here, here it was towards the end, dated 15th July, 1910.

'Young daughter trapped in burning farm house. Farmer McKenzie's daughter, Agnes, died when she ran from the house down the hill with her baby son and into the railroad tunnel, their clothes and hair in flames. It was presumed she

was trying to reach the pond on the far side of the tunnel. Witnesses said they could hear her screams for miles around but were too late to help. She had tried to douse the fire by rolling her baby on the floor of the tunnel but the brave girl was overcome herself and they both burned to death in the tunnel under the tracks.'

After this piece, Greg saw an additional few words at the end, which he stood and stared at, unable to take in the tragedy.

'Since that night, a rail worker struck his match for a smoke on the way home in the tunnel under the tracks. He came out in a hysterical state, and had to be slapped into life by his distraught wife, when he arrived home telling a tale of hearing deathly screams and a spectral wind that blew out his match. Others of his mates have since come forward with similar disturbing stories. All say something must be done about it.'

Greg sat on the nearest rickety chair to think, then clattered downstairs when he heard his Ma and Pa come in. Almost before they could speak, Greg recounted the story of his way home, trying not to sound too garbled or stark mad. When he started shaking with tears and sobs, his Pa interrupted with,

"Stop right there, son. Hey…calm it… sit down…you know why? It's the fever talkin' and tell ya why I know? Well, that tunnel you're tellin' us 'bout was blocked up many a long year ago, bein' as what happened in there an' all to poor folk tellin' stories 'bout bein' taken real' bad inside. Yep, all blown sky high and blocked off. Done with long since, ole son. And good riddance, I say. Don't ya agree, Ma?" She nodded. He noticed her, at the same time, glancing out of the window.

"So…stop worritin', and get some rest, boy. All be forgotten come mornin'."

His Pa was probably right. He had to admit he *had* felt pretty lousy last night. Not much better now. However, he had to go see for himself when he could hear them both snoring.

There was the entrance, no doubting that, on his home side. A rusty iron railing blocked the way, overgrown and strangled by weeds. Nothing else to see. He checked twice. Just as he was turning to go home before they missed him, the harvest moon slid out from behind clouds, enabling him to spot a flash of yellow not far inside the rails, where the weeds were thinner. Peering closer into semi-darkness, he recognised it. *His* matchbox. He knew it was this one, as the lid had been singed when he and Scoot were mucking around yesterday.

He looked harder, gently easing it carefully towards him with the help of a stick. When it was near enough, he groped until he felt it under his finger. His nerves shivered as he slid back the lid to reveal…a single match.

IT SEEMS TO ME

"Thank God for a visitor. Sit down. Welcome to my world. Not the Ritz, you'll see, eh? What in God's name am I doing in this fun palace?"

"It's thanks to that swine you married, remember? Look, Fran, you know exactly what I think, don't you, gal? Come on. Admit it."

"Go on. Remind me. I know you're going to."

"He's never been good for you."

"Oh, yeh, and you have?"

"Actually, yes."

"Give me a for instance 'cos believe me, nothing's clear in this rat hole anymore. Say it. I need to hear it."

"For a kick off, darlin' I'm bloody straight forward. What you see…and all that. And he's a manipulative, devious, two-faced con man. How's that for starters?"

"Otherwise, he's ok, yeh? I know, I know what you're saying. He's also my husband, remember?"

"Yeh, yeh. For how much longer, I want to know, my little traveller."

"Traveller? What the hell do you mean?"

"Well, as in Gullible's Travels. Get it? Oh, don't bother. But, seriously, you are."

"Are…sorry, I am…what?"

"Gullible. As they come, sweetheart."

Pete was silent for a while and they both drew breath. He leaned forward across the table between them, closely watched by prison officers on duty, ranged around the long echoing visiting room. He pushed her mousy fringe back from her worried eyes before he spoke again.

"Look, I know Graham's my best mate, but…"

"But…?"'Fran looked quizzically at Pete, and glanced briefly round in a nervy state at the other conversations. She turned back to him and he

continued, a look of irritation on his face.

"Well, old Gray's a trier but hell, you can do better, Franny. A lot better. Let's face it, he's never loved you, honey."

A fleeting expression of something between shock and horror passed across her pale, tired face. Fran wasn't prepared for that. It stung. She bored through his face with unblinking grey-blue eyes, so that they made him feel the need to speak again.

"Told me as much. A while back. Said he couldn't think why the pair of you had ever tied the knot. Sorry, love." He paused.

"And there's something else. That's what I've really come to say today."

She sat back in her chair and finally spoke, her eyes slightly filling with a tell-tale glisten.

"Go ahead. Lay it on me." She tried to sound nonchalant but inside she was a mass of spiders, all scrambling around in her stomach, and some of them threatening to make it out of her mouth. That was how it felt.

"It's to do with Barbara."

"Your wife? What's she got to do with the price of fish?"

"Well…" and he shifted in his chair, "I've seen her er…visiting, shall we say, your precious Gray on many occasions lately. I've been keeping an eye on the situation for you, Fran.'

"And your point?"

"I should have thought it was bloody obvious or do I have to draw you a plan?"

Fran noticed how Pete shuffled his shoes under the table. Nervously. And there was something in his eyes she couldn't explain.

"Ok. So she's a kind visitor cheering up the halt and lame."

"After midnight? That's when she often sneaks back in to our bed. When I ask her, she says not to

worry, she's comforting her mate Sally 'cos the woman's going through a bad patch."

Silence.

"I know, lovey. I know what the cheatin' pair are up to and now you should too. Don't you agree?"

She coughed to fill the quiet empty space between them.

"Do you know what I'm saying? I'm saying, let's get it together, you and me, when you get out of here. Properly. Come on, Fran…What's to lose? I'll wait as long as it takes…Whatta you say?…I've loved you for ages now. And sweet old you didn't even know. That's what I like about you."

He hung on her reply which was aeons in coming.

"You say your Barbara and my Gray are an item. Is that what you're asking me to believe?"

"Whether you believe it or not, honey bunch, it's true as I sit here. But if you choose not to see what's under your pretty little nose, sweetheart, then I suppose I'll bow out to a better man."

"Me and Gray. He's always loved me. To distraction, he keeps telling me after all this time. But…" and Fran stopped speaking to stare out of the window. She thought about her sister Annie and how she, Fran, had been sick with worry about her over the last months. Annie had been diagnosed with cancer but had sworn Fran to secrecy so even Gray didn't know. Maybe her distraction had shown. She physically shivered when she thought about Barbara and Gray.

Through the barred window, she caught sight of a very familiar person striding purposefully towards the front entrance to the prison block. It was Graham although there wasn't much time left. Hardly worth coming. Must think it's important.

"Hell, Pete, I've just seen Gray. On his way in. They'll clear him in security then let him through when you've gone. Better go. Ta for coming. We'll…er…sort things out soon."

"It's over to you then, darling Fran."

"Remember what I've just said. He never ever loved or cared for you at all. I love you to…the moon and back" and he laughed as he planted a cheeky kiss on her cheek and checked out.

When Gray looked for her across the buzzing room she stared at him before smiling.

He said, "I really want to tell you something, Fran."

"That's spooky. I've something to tell you. You first. You haven't got long now."

"No. You." Graham looked closely into her eyes.

The staff on either side of the room scrutinised everyone closely. The whole room held its collective breath. Or so it felt. One officer called, "Five minutes, folks. So wrap it up. Thank you, ladies and gents."

She happened to notice that since she looked out earlier, a bird had dirtied the window. Her eyes were stinging as she began to speak. Outside, it had started to rain.

JED'S TALE

It wasn't that I was born not liking him. It just sorta slowly happened. He was a leader.

I was not. And he knew it. He was eldest. I was second and then little sis. Lumpy Lisa he called her. That was the first time I decided he was not all that. She was ok as kid sisters go, I guess, dreamin' round the house in a gypsy skirt and mauve lipstick, smellin' of white patchouli. Well, that's what my girlfriend said it was. And Ally McEvoy would know. Local boys had nicknamed her 'Trapper.' She liked it that way, and so did I. Plenty of 'em had tried their luck. But she was 'fussy.' she said. Spaghetti thin. She could wolf-whistle better than any guy, so when we went out, all the dumb girls looked at me. They didn't know. But I did. And she was tough as a chunka diamond. She kept two white rats and fed 'em live chicks. Guys would watch us walk down Main Street, and even Rowdy Miller, lazy shyster, kept shtum. Unusual for him, havin' a gob like the Grand Canyon. It had got him into a whole heapa trouble. Like the time he spat abuse behind Ole Madman Danny Deever. Danny had turned around so fast, and run at Rowdy like a rhino on heat. He'd pinned him to the handy fence line and pulled a shiny kitchen knife out of a hidden pocket in his dungarees. Rowdy always called Ole Deever 'Sir', after that.

Anyhow, my brother Lou was no oil paintin' neither. Although *he* had other ideas. He was always checkin' his blonde hair, flossin' his smile or was down town, pumpin' iron. So he *said*. But Jack Orton said he knew 'otherwise' and didn't care to say what. Jaywalkin' Jack had been a mate of my bro's since beginnin' o' time. Him and Boots Laurie. A fair few of the local old folk said, 'that son o' yours'll do anything for anyone, Mrs Jackson-Clement. Yep, ya sure got a good apple there.' Said he carried groceries, opened doors. Things I never

saw. He used to pull faces at them codgers soon as they was outta sight. Called 'em a buncha crumbly losers waitin' to die and one day, he might just help 'em to. Ma never heard. But I did. He knew I did. He grabbed me once, sayin' 'let me look under your hair, at them weird eyes under there and extra ears.' He said 'sumthin' might 'happen if I didn't leave off.' Told me 'walls talked'. I never bothered tellin' Ma that bit. It would have hit deaf ears. She and Pa thought he was the blueberry pie-eyed boy. I knew different. Legs off Jenny Long Shanks, petals offa daisies, oh, and at five years old, when Grandpappy and Grammsy turned around, heads off every cute jelly baby in the bag. They never knew. I did and he knew I did.

Anyways, last Friday I was hangin' round the park, off Wichison Fourth, waitin' for Ally to show, when Jack and my bro wandered by. They never saw me, on account of the old monkey puzzle tree, in mid-summer and all that. Well, I had an 'inklin" as my mate Buzz Murray called it. I kept a way behind and watched them get swallowed into a half derelict condo block. A hot breeze whipped paper up, swirled it round and dumped it by the same entrance. A smell of diesel mixed with pee and paraffin. Why in hell's name did Lou wanna be here? Why did I? I would pick up Ally first. 'Course, she said, don't bother. Leave 'em to it. But I wanted to see, so she stayed back there in the park. Don't hang in that dump too long, she said. Or I may not be here, and winked at me, in that cool way she had. I knew she'd be there. And she knew I knew.

I snuck in. The stairwell stank. Fish. Decay. Artless Graffiti. I heard voices at the top of the next flight. The voices were gettin' raised. One of them was Lou's. I began to climb the dozen or so steps that curved to the left. A drum beat came from one room below. Like a bad film set. A black cat sneaked by. I jumped. The voices were louder now. A shot rang out and the sound of shattering glass was simultaneous. I quickened my

pace and blasted, "Hey! Stop right there! It's the law. Come out with your hands up!" like I'd seen 'em do on TV. Scare 'em out, before…before what? Well, I scared *myself* with the way it came out. Sheriff Leroy woulda been proud. Suddenly, three or four bodies piled on toppa me. These guys hurtled by, without sayin' nuthin'. Like there was a packa mad wolves on their tail, and death on the stairs was better than lettin' 'em catch up. One threw up on the bottom step. And then, silence. No brother. Then, from nowhere, comes Jack, minus Lou. Pushes past me as if I was invisible and disappears out into the glare, white faced and shakin' like peanut jelly.

I dodged up the last three steps, in time to see Lou comin' out of a doorway, Rowdy ahead of him, eyes wide in disbelief to see me. A glint of somethin' caught the sun's rays off the high window and went as soon as it came. Rowdy shoved past and barrelled downstairs. Lou shouted, "Now, git, you son of a bitch, Miller. And remember I won't be warnin' twice, get my drift?" Then, Lou spoke to me.

"What the hell are *you* doin' here, Titch Jed?"

"I might ask you the same," says I.

"Yeh, well, it was nuthin."

"Let me be the judge of that," I said.

"Get outta here. Just go home, And don't *ever* say what you saw to Ma and Pa. Promise?" He gave me that stare. The jelly baby stare.

"Spose so, bein' as I never did see nuthin. Exceptin' Tommy Yates and lousy Lee Clooney on the stairs and I know what folks say 'bout them. And some other guy. Why wasn't buddy Jack there for you, huh?"

"What, like *you* were, kiddo?" and Lou looked me full in the face.

"But…good timin' titch…before…well…anyhows, that was *some* actin' voice, for a kid, I'd say," and he winked, before hustlin' me down and out. He walked off. Without lookin' back, he threw, "Thanks, bro," over his shoulder. The breeze nearly whisked it away but I

heard. He knew I heard.

Ally *was* still there. Swinging, chewin' gum and whistlin' soft to herself.

She said, "What took you…? I started to answer but she carried on.

"I spoke to Jack. Ya just missed him. Said Lou was faced off. It got nasty. Someone pulled a shooter. Jack was shakin' an all. He was real cut up that he pulled out. Seemed worried Lou won't forgive him. And do you know why?"

"No," I said, feelin' galled that *she* knew and not me.

"Well, it was cos brother Lou had a tip off that there was gonna be a messin' and you were a bully boys target meat cut. Rumour goes, some Jimmy new guy in town is throwin' his weight about. Tomorrow night. Under Up-Mile Bridge, our Saturday date spot. Dya see *now?*"

"So?" I said.

"So…Lou was goin' there to *protect* you. Don't you see, fat face? I think you might owe him." She swung higher, chewed harder, and whistled louder. Hell. *Me* owe Lou. I smiled inside. A quick-silver smile like the flash I saw earlier.

"Er…who had the…? I began.

"What?"

"No…no…it's ok…forget it, Als."

"Oh, and your sweet sis Lisa was helpin' 'em. Tellin' 'em where and when you go. That's cos she's sweet on that dumb new Jimmy. Just for the record."

"Is that so?" I said. My smile died inside. On two counts. Ally says it just goes to show. I said, I know. And she knew I did.

LOOKIN' FOR GEORGE

Hail peppered his car windows as if it would break the glass. It had been a long winter and a long week and he drove back to his flat like a homing pigeon, to the beers that had his name on them, stacked in the fridge for a Friday night chillax as 'they' called it nowadays. Personally, he hated the word. Still, 'whatever'. Ugh, another meaningless word he loathed. He told himself he deserved a well-earned break after dealing with all those difficult cases, of which there had been many since Christmas, with their associated problems. Sometimes, folk could be so dense that any progress he wanted to make was wiped out by the time they all took to come round to what *he* had projected in the first instance. Enough of all that…a week off, he was owed the time before the new year's leave sheets were compiled.

Parking the car up, and dodging the early March sleet spray, to finally sprawling on the sofa with that tinny in his hand had all been achieved in record time. No-one else to worry about. He'd long since given up the idea of getting hitched. Too set in your ways, his sister once said. He couldn't help thinking there was something in the way she said it though…was it the 'green-eyed' monster? Those kids of hers were like the bloody Munsters. Now, how about a film? Action, horror, no, maybe not that, he saw enough, suspense, thriller? Whilst considering these options, his phone rang. Oh, God, what now? He had a house rule to answer all incoming calls, but lately there had been a rash of wrong numbers and it was becoming really tiresome, such as,

'Hi, is that the tanning room?' Like hell it was. Quite the reverse, he was allergic to the sun's rays and had to wear a special cream, medically prescribed, whenever he travelled abroad. Which wasn't often these days.

Or else it was, 'Oh, er…hello…is that Sun Days?' He had been tempted to tell that one, 'No, you daft bint, it's a bloody Monday,' but he had bitten his tongue just in time.

Perhaps he should book them in for an appointment. That should confuse them at the goddam tanning salon. He had a tin of Ronseal in the shed: Shade 37, Light Cedar. 'Ask them if they want a Brazilian with it, sir,' his opposite had suggested at work. They often had a laugh. 'What's the latest, George?' Last week it was calls for a taxi. That had great possibilities for mayhem. Then there had been some for an estate agent the previous month. He could have sold his flat a dozen times. Now *that* one might come in handy some day. And not forgetting there was his name-sake, the 'other' George in the phone book, the one with no 'e' on his surname. Just his luck. Should he change his number? But each time he was on the verge of doing so, he remembered all that went with the change. He had done it once before, many moons ago in 'another life' and had ended up with no end of other unexpected related problems and been put off bothering. He had decided to stick with the free entertainment. A gravelly Scottish accent rapped out,

"I'm lookin' for George."

When he didn't recognise the voice he decided, right, that's it. I'm in the mood for a laugh. The wine was starting to loosen his tongue. What the hell.

"Speaking." Play along. Roll with it.

"You'll know why I'm phoning, so no need to explain, eh?" and the caller made a strange sound, half way between a sneer and a grunt. So bizarre did it seem that his interest was suddenly aroused. He cleared his throat.

"Just remind me. I need to get it all straight in my mind. Had a lot on my plate lately. Oh, and so sorry, but I've forgotten *your* bloody name…I'm getting worse these days with names…"

"You and me both, George. If you insist I have a label, then 'tonight, Matthew, I'm going to be' - Rory. Rory Flynn to you." And he paused as if waiting for the laugh that didn't come. He continued,

"Bad memory, that's life, eh? Oh, so sorry, if you'll excuse me putting it like that, I mean at the present time an' all."

"Yeh, yeh, 'course, But why does *'that's life'* make you apologise?"

"Well, what with your wife being dead and all…' Pause, silence, before the caller spoke again.

"Oh, I see, I get it…just your little joke, sir. Yeh, yeh, good one…you don't seem too worried about it. That's good, that's good…better than being traumatised like I've seen some of 'em I've dealt with. Proper loopy they can go, didn't suit their character, I suppose. You've gotta be able to hack it."

"Oh, yeh, you do. I guess I'm one of those then. Able to hack it I mean. Not the loopy sort, eh?" and this time he *did* laugh down the phone. Silence broke out. They eventually spoke, stupidly, together,

"Hello..?"

"Hello?..."

He eased himself back down onto the sofa from the stick-still standing position he'd been holding, his interest was now well and truly whetted by this stranger's voice, which sounded like a cinder grating under a door. He knew he had no idea who he was but he found he had wanted to stand beside the landline as if that aided his listening skills. It was what he did at work. Always stood for important points or when curiosity demanded it. Tonight, his legs were aching from an especially long tedious meeting today, when he'd held the floor to a hundred colleagues, many of whom had shown signs of GES-or 'glazed eye syndrome' in the late afternoon 'grave-yard' slot. Still, he didn't blame them. He nearly sent himself off and had to pinch his thumbs, a trick he'd learned to keep on track many

years back from a former boss. Another boring old sod who should have retired aeons ago but kept on hanging on 'for the pen set and paper weight' he said. Sad old git. Some said his missus didn't want him hanging about all day 'under her feet', so old Charlie battled on.

He had noticed he was starting to grind his teeth, on a back molar that was fast becoming cracked and level with the gum line. It was what he did when something stressed him or frustrated his curiosity. Might be OCD someone had suggested. He'd ignored it. Another bloody thing to worry about. Just made it worse. These so called 'helpful' do-gooders should keep their… he stopped himself and continued,

"Sorry. Thought you'd gone. I need you to get me properly up to speed."

He was really starting to get into this now. It made up for all those other calls he had wanted to send up. On an otherwise dull evening it was better than a film so far. Only one thing missing, a bag of popcorn. Maybe the other poor sod lived a more interesting life than him. Although finding out he'd lost his wife lately wasn't too good, for starters. Let's see if his luck would improve.

The phone crackled at him. The caller coughed slightly and he heard a door slamming somewhere on the end of the line. A child was sobbing in his own block of flats and voices were being raised. Not another domestic to sort.

"Well, I followed the pair of them to a five star place on the Hampstead side of town, where you'd already warned me they may go. Spot on. I waited 'til they'd parked up outside and a doorman drove the car to park it for them in…"

"Ok, ok, cut all that crap and get to the main film. Haven't got all night, oh, and speak up, please. Which hotel? Where?" There was a gap whilst the caller got over the impatient command. More tooth grinding. He hoped the caller couldn't hear it. The line was becoming fainter. The last thing he needed right now was for his

phone to lose juice.

"Ok…ok…I was coming to that. The Hotel Astra Nova, on Richmond Grove up in Town. I sat in reception when they registered, took a note of their room number and let them take the lift to the fifth floor. Smart gaffe, sir, if you…"

"Oh, yes, yes…go on, go on…"

"Room thirteen, lucky for some, eh? I waited some minutes before it happened like he said it would. Lover boy came out to go down to reception and I presumed your wife would be…"

"Whatever." The word seemed appropriate now.

"I gave him time to go down in the lift before I made my move. After that, it was easy, guv."

"Yeh, ok. I have to *hear* it. All of it."

"Oh, sure, sure." He coughed again before resuming,

"I knocked and when she called out, 'that was quick. Forgotten your key, love?' I told her it was room service. She shouted come in. Just so that you know, I used a Sig Sauer 9mm, silenced correctly, guv, for the job. No trouble. No trouble at all. Used it often. It's my baby, you see, guv, it…"

"I know, I know. Keep to the point man…" That tooth was really feeling it by this time. He was sitting bolt upright by this time.

"When I left, she was face down on the bed. Two clean shots. One in the head and one in the back for good measure. Dead as…The laundry will be washing the sheets out forever…Oh, sorry, guv, I shouldn't…"

"Don't worry. We all have to move on. Good work, good work. Bloody cow. Deserved all she got. Understand me? Or maybe you've been luckier than me in the woman stakes. And all left clean in the room? Traces, fingerprints and the like. God. What am I saying? Like you have to be checked, sorry, sorry… Man of the world that you are, eh, pal?"

"No prob, guv. I understand your concern. No

worries. Clean job. All done and out quicker than my wife's credit card. There was no sign of boyfriend when I left by the fire-exit staircase. Met no-one. That brought me out into King's Street from where I walked maybe quarter of a mile, passed no-one, only one mangy dog and a bloke spewing his brains up in the gutter. Been holed up since in this grotty bed-sit, Rent-A-Cockroach. The bitch that runs this place should be…oh, well, shan't be here long anyhow, thank god. More people to see, places to go. So it's settle up time. Tell me where and when and I'll be gone. You'll never see me again."

"Yep, ok," he thought fast. The tooth nagged like a headache.

"Go to the back entrance of Ellison Park, in the car park, eleven tonight. Remind me how much we agreed on."

"Twenty five" The caller spat that out quickly enough.

"God, was the bitch worth that much. Must have been mad. Ok. The packet will be there, in the cubicle, men's loo, there's a gap behind the cistern. Eleven sharp."

"Make sure it is. I have pictures of er…clients who did the dirty. Not pretty, sir, not pretty at all. Know what I'm sayin'?"

"It'll be there. Ellison Park, car park at back entrance opposite the King's Arms pub. Eleven p.m. With twenty five grand in it. Get off the line now. All good stuff. You've changed my life. Nice *not* knowing you, Rory." And he put the phone down, taking a swig of fast-warming beer as soon as he could. He sat back in the chair to gather his thoughts for a minute or two before picking it up again.

"Andy? George Broome here. Yeh, yeh, I know… I'm on leave. Listen up, old son. I have a job for you and a back up tonight. Yeh, tonight. Sorry but it's got to be over to you on this one. Go up into Town for eleven p.m,

Ellison Park, back entrance. I want you to stake the place out in an unmarked car, no sparklers on, nothing. There will be a guy in there who thinks someone will be passing over twenty five grand in a package, left in the gents. Got that? What? Old cliché? Whatever." God, there it was again.

"Oh, yeh, well, it was me thinking quickly on the hoof. Seen too many films, eh? Twenty five thou for a hit contract. He's taken another guy called George's wife out. Obviously thought he was talking to the right one. There are two of us. Explain later."

"Sorry? Yeh, just had the conversation with this guy. I thought it was another wrong bloody number. Played him along. Lamb to the…and all that. All neat and tidy for us. At least that's what I'm hoping. Shouldn't be a problem. If you could give it the necessary clearances in the office now. Oh and Andy, put a trace on the call I've just had. It was Number Withheld, as you'd expect."

His young officer paused almost reverentially before saying, "Sure. Got all that, sir. Will do. Can't wait to hear about this one. Dedication to the job, even off duty. Just like you, if you don't mind me saying, sir." It didn't hurt to do a bit of arse licking on occasion.

"Tell ya what, Andy, it's the easiest case I've ever had to solve. Not bad, this arm chair detective work, eh? I'll be down soon as you've sewn him up with the arrest. Cheers, Andy. Oh, and enjoy the rest of your evening…what? Now now…no need to be like that! You'll get your own back. I think my own leave was never meant to be either!'

George put the phone down, pushed himself back in his chair.

He made a mental note to book in at the dentist. His back tooth was hurting like hell. Still, all in a good cause. Then Inspector George Broome downed the rest of the can, considering what a difference one little letter makes.

Standing up and spreading his arms, he announced theatrically,

"Tonight, George, …you're gonna be…kippered. Or…whatever."

LOST BENEFITS

George made loneliness an art form. Almost a science. He hated fuss and just went quietly about his business, expecting others to do the same. When he was a lad, his mother had despaired of him ever making friends from the day he started school. He used to say they were too much trouble and could he have a dog instead. By the time he was twenty five she gave up, as anybody would, and went about her own life. George was relieved. Perhaps now, he thought, I can breathe, but as the years went on, the effects of her earlier smothering took its toll. Sometimes he even wondered if she had done the same to his Father, who had died of a heart attack when George was fifteen, shortly followed by the dog, run down by a car. At first, he didn't realise what had happened to him but when yet another year had rolled on and life was passing him by, he built up 'feelings,' as he called them. George wouldn't have recognised them for what they were. Resentment. He simply didn't have the words and one day he upped and moved out.

No warning. Just skedaddled. He savoured that word, as well as 'diddley squat' which was what his mother told others his father did, and often sat by his new flat window repeating them over and over to himself, whilst cracking a can of his favourite beer. She *never* allowed alcohol, and he downed it in one. He decided he would tidy up then go down to collect his benefits. God knows, he needed them; the electric supply was dwindling and there was only one slice of bread left; even *that* was showing signs of blue mould. His Mum would…he stopped the thought in its tracks, and stubbed his smoke out in the can.

Locals in the town recognised George on his 'daily rounds 'as the man who looks as if he thinks he's being followed.' Which indeed he was, behind those rheumy

grey eyes. They watered badly in winter and he was constantly dabbing them with a grubby hanky that he stuffed back into a ripped pocket of his greasy corduroy checked jacket. Leather patches on each elbow had been sewn on by his mother. George's sparse ginger hair, a sore point all of his life, was slicked down either side of a centre parting, like a pair of wet kippers slapped carelessly on top. His yellow front teeth were cracked by too many boiled sweets and he rarely smiled except when he laughed to himself at private jokes. He stammered when he was really stressed and drew tobacco smoke deep into his lungs to calm himself. *She'd* made him take his 'filthy habit' out into the back yard. People found him disconcerting and one or two would change direction or pop inside the nearest shop if they spotted him up the road. One elderly spinster found herself buying two pieces of smelly haddock she never wanted, to avoid an upfront collision.

George pulled himself up from his seat at the window and checked the flat before he left. He re-arranged a couple of beer mats on the coffee table, plumped up his one and only cushion then propped up a photo of his old dog, Ossie, which had fallen off the mantle shelf. Remembering there were more family pictures in a private wooden box that held his treasures; like an army of lead soldiers, a stamp collection and boxed Dinky cars in pristine condition from 14, Acacia Gardens, George got one of his 'feelings' that he *had* to look *now* .He dragged a spindly chair up to the heavy double-fronted wardrobe. He was completely over-taken by the idea he *must* take out any photos of his mother and throw them out with the trash before he was a day older. She was still stifling him from up there, he could 'feel' it; something he had never anticipated when he had carried them away.

He stretched higher, higher still; his skinny arms were too short. He made a last gargantuan effort and was a few centimetres from the box, when the chair

wobbled alarmingly. Panic set in. He made a grab for the lid, pushed it off and his fingers grasped something. His chair tipped sideways and the wardrobe door suddenly shot open. George clung on for his life but the old mahogany toppled down on him, but not before he hit the floor and his skull thwacked the deck with a disturbing finality. Blood began to trickle out of one ear, and ooze down his nose as he groaned, trying once to lift his head before losing strength and falling back. An eerie silence descended on the flat. His travel clock made the only noise, a present from his mother when he was eight. The kitchen tap started dripping; a lone fly zizzed intermittently and landed on George's oily kippered hair, cleaning its feelers. The box had smashed open and pictures of his mother were scattered all around the floor near his body; one or two were streaked with bright red droplets. She smiled a horrific distorted grin as she lay beside her son, in a trick of the fading light. George's life jet seeped in a slowly spreading stain, joining up the dots on the worn tweed carpet. His outstretched arm pointed in the direction of the broken box.

When the medics arrived, after a neighbour complained of hearing a terrible bang on his ceiling, George was found to be already dead from a massive blow to the head. The wall was splattered with deep carmine that had dripped down the nicotine stained yellow paint, and pooled on the floor, forming an abstract work of grotesque art. The deceased's hand, when prised open, was found to be clutching a picture of George and his mother on holiday in Blackpool. He was on a donkey, his anxious mother holding him so tightly he looked like he was being strangled.

As they carried his body out, a policeman enquired of his neighbour, Jim, who the lady in the photo might be.

"His mum," he told him. "He once showed me when he moved in. Mind you, it's funny that, officer."

"What's that, sir?"

"Well, he never got on with her. He always said she'd be the death of him."

The ambulance door slammed shut and slid away into the ghostly mizzle of a cold January afternoon.

MEMBERS ONLY

The waiter was taking so long to bring my meal, you know how it is, I began to lose interest in my latest monthly Club Crime, 'Through A Veil Darkly' and started to doodle with my eyes around the room. That's when I noticed a stain on the ceiling. Like I've seen before in eateries. You know. The one that looks like there was a mass murder in there last night. Right where you're sitting. X marks the spot or something. Or did someone bang the tomato sauce so hard on the table that it managed to hit the roof, leaving that misshapen weeping wound. No, you probably don't know. That's because it's possibly only myself and Mikey who notice what Mikey calls 'these phenomena of an active curious mind in our natural environment'. He's like that, Mikey. Puts things so succinctly. He says,' it's all about clues Mal, you see.'

Sorry, I forgot. I haven't introduced myself yet. Malcolm Anthony George Cheever. Mikey calls me Cheever the Cleaver, but that's his sense of humour coming out. So I call him 'Mike The Spike' 'cos of the books he reads from our Crime Club International. Mikey says some folk look for fossils or interpret cave drawings, so we identify clues in *our* own way. 'It's all about clues, Mally, all about clues, mate. Like reading the road when you're driving, pal. Oh, soz, old mate, you haven't got any wheels. Still, know what I mean?' And yes, I knew what he meant. Look at the walls. Look at the chair on occasions. But more especially look at the ceiling, in our experience. He told me to keep away if I saw it. I didn't need telling twice. But it didn't stop me noticing them.

We've seen these 'signs' in the restaurants and eating houses we frequent, anyway. Perhaps we crime readers take our genre too seriously. That's what Charlie Boardman has said to us, more than once. And

he sits any old where. Mikey says he's been lucky. So far. And looks at me. Mind, Charlie couldn't spot a ten ton artic coming at him when he was the only guy in front of it. But then he doesn't order books from Crime Readers Club. Mikey and I do. Monthly. On the dot. Don't miss. Well, more to the point, can't miss or we get withdrawal. Proper cold turkey. Even been known to go without smokes and scratch cards to get them. My old mate Mikey understands. Same as me. We swap notes. Best. Worst. The ones that keep you guessing right to the last page. You know. All of that. Mind you, poor Mike, silly sod, often gets behind with his payments and The Club get pokey with him. I usually help him out and he buys me a pint when he can. Which isn't often. The worst one was when he ordered the whole of 'Encyclopaedia of Crime Since 1850 To 1950.' *Every* one. That took a bit of sorting out for him, I can tell you. He's on a detailed volume of 'The 'Daily Habits of British Serial Killers' at present. Got as far as Jack The Ripper. Me? I've just started 'The House on Sycamore Terrace,' a razor-edged thrill from beginning to end. Cuts to the bone. Well, we'll see. The blurb has told me to 'turn off the phone, shut down my computer and say goodbye to friends and family.' The last part won't take me long, the middle one I don't possess and my mobile hardly ever has any money on it. Well, we'll see. Tell ya later. That's what I told Mike last night.

Back to the stain in question. I noticed *this* one, you see, because it was different. They all have their own characteristics; well, this baby appeared to run down the wall towards me in a double-take, giving it a strangely more convincing touch. As if the assassin had had two shots at the poor captive victim in the middle of his or her steak tartare until he or she was satisfied they wouldn't see another Christmas. Whether that is to be viewed as an advantage or not, I leave with you. They are not just found in dark seedy oily cafes where the chef works behind a bead curtain. You know. The sort

where you need to wipe the chair before sitting down, pop the cutlery into a scalding teapot which you've ordered for the purpose and be careful where you place your feet. 'Stuff' has turned up down there I won't go into now, just heed my warning. I'm told it's all about arty farty presentation today. All this cordon blue rubbish. You know what you can do with that.

It has almost become a routine I have adopted now. Sit down. Look up. And remember, the mark is no regarder of any stars the place might have gained from Egon Ronay either. Oh, no. It's not fussy. More like an animal marking its territory you might say. Mikey said it might not just be an animal either but then clammed up and wouldn't be drawn on the subject. Just winked. He was like that. The stain in question was, a few months ago in a fairly run of the mill pub; well, yes, it *was* a mill actually, a water-mill, and I was on step three of my routine waiting for sausage and mash, when I saw it. Bull's eye. There. Just a few tables over nearer to the door, to the right of where I sat. A dark reddish-purple, running down into nasty tartrazine and burnt sienna streaks. Creepy. Here's what happened next. A couple entered the mill and sat at that table. It was a normal Saturday night, wasn't it? Couples dining out. Bottles being cracked open, as fast as possible. Lots of smiling faces trying to throw off the worries of a week's work. The weekend starts here and all that. Nothing unusual.

The woman seeped an unhealthy tallow glow off her waxen cheeks, lips frozen in an obviously false fixed grin. Her crow-black hair was thin, sparse you might say, and her skin stretched over her hands and face as if it were two sizes too small. Her movements were quick like a bird's. Crooked fingers, painted with bright scarlet polish and looking as if she had not long since dipped them in fire. Like I say, nothing unusual. Except for one thing, and here was the bombshell shock, my dear reader. Her companion, who appeared five minutes

later, was…The Spike. Yep, my mate, no less. Here, in this pub with a piece of skirt I could never have believed. Why the hell had he not mentioned her to me before? We told each other everything. Or so I had thought. They looked as if they were quite familiar to each other. His purpled blue skin suggested high blood pressure in the dim light. His eyes were narrowed like a cat's, it was hard to tell at whom or where he was looking. A long black overcoat fell to touch his black biker-style highly polished boots. They must have cost him. I'd only ever seen him in holey Levis and a black T-shirt. So. Out to impress, was he? He sat quickly down and watched whilst she removed her red fur-trimmed coat. Help was not forthcoming but she was obviously used to that. They sat without speaking for a full five minutes until the waiter brought a bottle of wine. I could smell patchouli and sandalwood. Strange but I'm sure the temperature went down a few degrees after they appeared. Mikey had always said, 'that's an anomaly, Mal, my son. Consider yourself lucky,' and raised his eyebrows alarmingly as he lit a ciggy and blew the smoke right at me, as if to emphasise a point. But he wouldn't say more. That's Mikey all over. See, I believe him. He's studied these things. He had his back to me by now. and was deep in a low conversation.

They ordered a meal and started talking with gradually raised voices, hers snapped and scratchy, his falsely smooth and treacled. No love lost here I couldn't help thinking. I bit into a sausage savagely and considered the scenario as I chewed. She was working her way fast through a bottle of Jose Cueva. He drank beer. When she, apparently Estelle, was given her meal, she grew gradually more agitated until she pushed it violently away after only two or three mouthfuls. Something was very wrong. Mikey was becoming equally irritated. His face twisted in a menacing sneer when he hissed at her through clenched teeth. My usually laid back mate showed 'bad signs', as Lee

Harrison had in 'The Lamented', and I knew what had happened to Lee and his old mother, in the last of a trilogy.

Then, as I watched them, she rose and began dragging her heavy blood red coat back on over her narrow shoulders. When the pair got up suddenly, paid their small bill and left in a hurry, I remembered what the hero did in last month's Crime Club, 'Killing Time'. I made sure I kept well into the shadows of a by now chill, purpling night as they made their way up Inkerman Main Street towards the new high rise block off Clevedon Mall. Neither spoke. There was only the noise of her clicking needle-thin black patent court shoes and the sound of a police siren in the near distance. An occasional cyclist swished by on the drizzled oily dark road, and a solitary dog sneaked up the narrow alley, known locally as Squeeze Gut. The story behind that is, er, interesting shall I say, but not now. I had to slink behind them in shadow of shops and houses, always keeping them just so far ahead but not so far as to lose them. But I had a good idea where they were headed.

Where Inkerman ran into Clevedon Road, the street split. They walked without a glance backwards, lucky for me, and took the left turn which would take them into Sunbury Street, before they climbed the steps into Aveley Mansions which was Mikey's pad. They would have to take the lift to Fifth floor, number 65. I had been to visit Mike half a dozen times over the last year, since I met him. That whole gaffe gave me the creeps, thinking back, with its lingering smell of cheap floor disinfectant, like a hospital, and long soulless claustrophobic corridors. Still, Mikey said, 'It's home, Mally boy, it's home, know what I mean?'

I was spot on. So here I was and I knew in my bones all was not well. Mike's agitation in the restaurant was the way I knew he 'came over all spooked' as he had described the feeling to me before. And I couldn't figure out for a while what to do. Should I

stay outside and keep them under' surveillance', as my hero Mitchell did, or should I 'storm the building' as Chief Super Dwight Andrews would in, 'Protecting The Innocent?' I decided on the latter course of action. Perhaps if I appeared at the door, it might act as a sobering influence on Mikey. I knew what he was like. It was worth a try. anyhow. I ran up the small. steep flight of steps and into reception area where I looked for the next lift up to Flat 65. It was at the top. So I waited. The smell started to get to me. An old geezer came in off the street, coughing his guts out and tottered off round the corner, belching loudly and spitting as he went. The lift slid beside me and clunked open. I entered and it took me, minus my stomach, to the fifth floor. where it regurgitated me before hissing silently away. I walked halfway down the corridor and stood outside 65. All was quiet, both inside and out. What the hell was I doing here? I lifted my hand to the bell but lowered it again. I had second thoughts. No. Best leave them to it. What business was it of mine? Mikey could be very scratchy at times. Maybe that's why I should check it out. I wavered. As I stood there, debating it with myself, the lift opened at the other end and a figure began walking towards me. Oh, God. I could do without this, I thought, turning my head the other way deliberately.

'What the hell? Yo mate!' came out of the disinfected dimness. I realised it was aimed at me and knew those tones anyway. That forthright loud jokey tone. Mikey. Beside me. I turned. He was smiling. In a surprised sort of way. Well, he would be, I thought. I usually phoned first.

'Hey, hey, come on in, Mally boy. You've just struck lucky. Been out for smokes. Only just back.' How's tricks? Which book you got now? No, don't tell me. Er, Roomful of Witnesses, eh' I read it. It's great. Not too clear an ending, mind. Go in, go in.'

I managed to stammer out a greeting and he started unlocking his door and ushering me through it,

into the smokey 'den' as he called it. He closed the door behind us with a determined push. I glanced around. There was no sign of the Scarlet Lady. What the…? Ok, so what now, Dwight? I sat in a chair he pushed toward me while he went to get coffees. I kept looking round. Maybe she was in the bathroom. Yes. That was it. How silly of me. That's where Maddy Wilson was in, 'Victim of Circumstance.' Calm down, Mal, I told myself. Mikey's clock hiccupped loudly and I could hear him percussing with the teaspoons and mugs in his narrow galley kitchen. And then it hit me. When he came in with the coffees. He was in his blue jeans and black T-shirt. Now, even Dwight would have struggled with that. Mitchell Taylor- Bradley would too. And he's used to these situations, as in, 'Watch Out for My Girl'. Maybe you've read that one. Mitchell's plain clothes now. He got promoted in, 'One Halloween'. He deserved it. It was the case involving Joe 'the Hook' Patterson that clinched it for him. Made your blood run cold.

And he tells me the tale, true, he says, of the table that was 'marked' when a lady eating there got gastroenteritis from the salmon dish, and died a week later. Then there was the couple in the local fish and chip café who ate on a marked table. Streaked down the lime-green wall that one was, he said. Well, *they* were on their way home when a car ran into them and the woman never recovered in hospital. And what about…? I had to stop him there. It's his theory that these marks portend evil. I'm not so sure myself. Coincidence, I suggest. But he just grins and taps the side of his nose. I don't argue. He says some women deserve it. I didn't ask. Later as I left, I noticed it. Hanging under his long black one. The blood-red coat.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

He, Ambrose St John Palgrave, was going to 'sort it out' today. Well, tonight. He would sort *them*. Whoever *they* were. All he knew was that he'd had enough. They'd all had enough of pussy-footing round the problem, expecting the police to pull their finger out. Fat hope. No. It was obvious to him, and to his neighbours when he'd spoken to them, that someone had to do something about the spate of burglaries and break-ins that had become almost an epidemic in the last few months in their exclusive estate, Andromeda Heights. Someone was taking the piss and Ambrose had decided that with his Special Para training in the army, *he* was going to be the one who would show them all he could still cut it on the battlefield of both physical and mental mind games. Oh, yes. His mates hadn't nicknamed him Ambush Ambrose for nothing.

The cross-bow, in *his* hands, was taken to a whole new level of lethal precision and anyone who knew Ambrose respected the fact that he knew the rules. Mind on the job and no messin' with his tools of the trade. Although, behind closed doors, he often polished and oiled and tinkered, caressing the bow's firing mechanism as if it were an intimate moment with an unknown female. Or he checked the sharpness of the blades on his Swiss army knife and special treasured sheath knife which he had inherited from his grandfather. These weapons felt to Palgrave as if they were alive, warm, and breathing. Part of him, really. Yes. He would flick them out, or describe an arc with the meatier one, time after time. It was hypnotic. Until his wife called him and, like the click of the illusionist's fingers, he had to go back into her world.

Tonight, the bow seemed to become one with his body. He stroked it as if it might sing to him. His security, really. And to back it up, he nursed the hunter's knife in a leather sheath around his waist. He

honed it at intervals on an old cracked leather strop he kept for the purpose, given him by his father. 'Strop, son, not strap,' his father used to tell him, emphasising this for a reason known only to him. Ambrose fingered the knife now and although it was lethally sharp, he had trained himself, by mind over matter, to be able to run his fingers along the blade, even with applied pressure, and not feel anything. Like walking on hot coals, broken glass or nails-it was all a matter of attitude. Almost anything was possible. His mates had nicknamed him this time 'The Caliph', and would outwardly mimic his actions but actually each had great respect for an old soldier's hard-earned good reputation. He had toyed with the idea of wearing his old leather army boots but drew the line at that. A bead of sweat broke out on his forehead and ran down his face. God, it was humid, he thought and packed away the strop tidily.

As he waited, he mused about all that Neighbourhood Watch stuff. Lots of little old dears peering, Miss Marple-like, through pristine white net curtains. Most of them were scared of their own shadows and more than one had been seen running away from her cottage, skirt held up, screaming. No. It was no good. He, Ambrose Palgrave, had to mobilise himself, stand by the bed, look lively, step up to the plate and all the other army sayings he had known. Para Ambrose was coming for any mad thief who threatened their quiet, civilised, manicured residents 'castles,' or 'palace' in the case of the gracious and Right Honourable Mrs Fiona Fotherington-Gascoigne. Now there *was* a Lady for you. All cocked little fingers, Doulton china tea cups, cucumber triangles and Darjeeling, darling; but my God, that lady was loaded. Ever since her old man had 'passed to another room' as she called it, wiping a tear from her eye, which miraculously appeared whenever he was mentioned. And he'd been in the 'other room' for ten years now, his wisteria long since wilted around the grand front door,

and her brass knocker never the same.

So, Palgrave took it upon himself, unbeknown to the other residents, to guard all of their properties from any future 'miscreants,' and he intended to begin that evening. He'd show the old duffer, Major George Pattinsby-Smythe, who deigned to call himself Chairman of The Neighbourhood Watch, that this was how it should be done. No offence to the old boy but when the chips were down, George showed signs of shaking in his gnarled arthritic fingers lately. The good Lord only knew what would happen if he had a weapon in one of them. Ambrose pondered the idea that it was more likely to be the strong smell of wintergreen liniment that would warn the intruder of his presence long before he appeared. He had a frozen shoulder complaint and used the medicated rub on it which hung in the air wherever he went. Poor old sod, but the ladies loved him.

Now, Palgrave was prepared to sit it out for as long as it took, starting with his own property, Ellersley Grange, a turreted gatehouse in the grounds of the far more imposing Ellersley Hall, tucked away at the edge of the well-heeled local village, known to residents as Widows' Corner; the lady occupants left behind when husbands passed to the 'other room'. Lately, their club numbers had risen. He had attended more than one funeral for a monied old girl, living on her own in a luxury mansion, who had fallen victim to the crazed violence of god knows who, appearing in the darkness from god knows where; one of whom had a dicky ticker and simply died of fright. Some say her eyes were staring in what seemed to be a state of apoplectic horror when she was attacked as she was watering plants in her conservatory, late one evening. 'Concealed in a group of palms, 'it' was. The poor woman never stood a chance,' said her friend. 'Never stood a chance. Went down like a felled tree, apparently. Ghastly, oh, so ghastly my dear,' relayed Hesta Fosseby.' She regaled

anyone who cared to listen with all the gory details, making folk so scared they daren't go near another potted plant bigger than a lily and would only sit in a conservatory in hours of broad daylight. And only then with a newly acquired guard dog.

No-one had been caught, let alone charged. A death was a death. And all for two pieces of Victorian jet, a cameo brooch and a cocktail ring which looked like a ruby but was only Murano glass. The silver treasures she had were hidden in the cellar, under a concealed trap-door and remained undisturbed. At least that was poetic justice of a sort. It was a mess. And totally unacceptable. The police didn't want to know and the case had gone quickly cold. An old biddy living alone with no living relatives. They had told them all to put bars on the windows and lock doors at all times, wherever they were in the house. Ladies should not walk out alone at night. All sound advice maybe but it did no good and hadn't helped anyone so far. The burglaries continued. The lunatic was still at large.

Ambrose lay on his stomach, snake-like, as darkness shawled the garden, sprawling flat across the rich crimson pattern of the expensive Axminster in his lounge, crossbow and knife ready, like the stalker he had been in his past career. He knew what real patience was. And a stillness that almost mimicked death. He prided himself on being able to out-wait anything. Patience was crucial. He watched, with held breath, as a pair of doves flew down and strutted erratically on the neat lawn. Get the hell out of here. He wanted to shout and wave his arms about but all he could do was wait impotently for them to take off to their roost. The dregs of the summer day had drained away in a sour orange sunset. A cool breeze tickled through the birches and lasers of moonlight silvered the slim trunks. Ambrose felt relieved that his wife was staying with her sister for a few days break or he knew she would have, by now, been nagging him to get to bed and what the hell did he

think he was doing down there? As it was, he could put all of his concentration on the task in hand as he, Ambrose St John Palgrave, had been trained to do. The shadow of a blackbird flitted across the monochromed garden, causing him to jump. Come on, Palbo, he remonstrated with himself. You're going soft, old boy. The purpling evening swathed tighter around. A smell of night-scented stock wafted in, a sweet sickly perfume that his wife Celia liked was now threatening to make him sneeze. God, please, not now. He managed to hold it back. His eyes watered, his nose tickled, so he used another old soldier's trick and willed it away. It worked. He could feel it sharpen up his thought processes again. Back to mind over…

What the hell was that? He strained his rapidly tiring eyes to see. A movement over to his left. There, again. A few seconds passed until he realised it was the canvas back of his garden chair flapping slightly in the air. The deckchair appeared like a ghostly reclining alien, in the strange grey light. It had almost fooled him. A few moments longer and he could have done battle with it. Made a citizen's arrest on a garden lounger. And he laughed inside. He was just fancying how he would have liked a cup of his wife's bedtime chocolate drink when he saw it. On the very edge of his vision, a dark shape, standing motionless, at the other side of the swimming pool. As he watched, it moved almost imperceptibly to the right and stood still once more. He could have sworn it was looking his way. He shivered and tightened his grip on the bolt. Steady, old son. Every nerve in his body was on alert, strung like the bow, pulsing with adrenaline. He felt he might burst with a growing desire to blast whoever it was to 'the other Room' straight away but kept calm and inched forward towards the open French windows. This was it. Trench warfare. No stopping now. Next move was to go over the top. Palgrave, he told himself sternly, let's see what you're made of and what you got your war medal

for. His fingers were beginning to go white and numb with the effort of gripping the weapon ever tighter. As if his life depended on it. Maybe it did. He stood up with slow, measured care and took cover in the folds of the heavy velvet drapes. A musky scent hung in the air. All the while, he never took his eyes off that shape. It continued to face his way and stand its ground. It gave an impression of a stooped tree trunk. Trick of the light, he told himself. He could out-sit a lion, if he had to. Like the time he had waited four hours for a hostage-taker to break cover in lonely terrain on Dartmoor and when the bastard had injured a colleague with a gun, he, Paste-em Palgrave had fired and killed him with one shot through the head. He knew the true meaning of stealth tactics. Guerrilla war had taught him that in the jungles of Malaya sharp wits were all that mattered.

He waited until the shape moved into the line of tall shrubs surrounding his swimming pool before he began crawling low into the mauve shadows of trees running alongside the red brick wall bordering the garden. He was ready. He breathed deep down into his diaphragm, another trick learned in training to steady taut nerves and enable oxygen to allow clearer thinking. With a sudden leap, of which a springbok might have been proud, Palgrave, the old soldier, ran across the damp lawn. He almost slipped over, his speed was so impressive, and as he whooped forward with a blood-curdling rugby cry he'd learnt in New Zealand, a long shadow emerged at his side of the pool and made as if to walk towards him. All was blurred, to Palgrave, nothing was clear in the twilight but he didn't need telling twice. Ambrose at first stood his ground, his face mercifully in shadow, pointing the fearsome weapon, daring it to move forward by the hopefully intimidating stance he took in front of it. Neither uttered a sound. It was as if tongue-tie had taken over. When it took a second step, he didn't need another signal. Automatic responses kicked in and enabled him to blast a bolt. Whoever it

was fell backwards, half into the pool. Palgrave was conscious of a flashback in his mind to that night on the Moors so long ago. It jellied his legs and he had to find a latent strength to move up closer, until he was looking down at the prostrate crumpled body.

The almost full moon moved out from behind a skim of cloud and revealed two mottled glassy beads in what Ambrose slowly realised was a vaguely familiar face. His brain failed to work as fast as it used to do all those decades ago on manoeuvres. And then he knew. He smelled a certain whiff. Methyl Salicylate. Unmistakeable. It was wintergreen. He realised that he was looking into the fast-fading milky eyes of Major George. Ambrose had a sudden vague memory that Old Smythe had set himself to 'bring them to justice if it killed him' at a meeting of the Neighbourhood Watch, a couple of weeks ago. No-one, including Palgrave, had taken any notice of the old fool. He always spoke through a haze of Scotch whiskey and a cloud of cigar smoke, promising this and that action would be taken but nothing ever came of it. And now, as Palgrave gazed down at him in a suspended state of horror and disbelief, he saw old George stare past him, hoary glazed eyes widening ever further to a transfixed position, somewhere over Ambrose's right shoulder, a look that was so horrific it caused Palgrave to whip around. As he did so, he was conscious of a high raised arm. It smashed a razor-sharp lump of granite from the nearby rockery with diamond-hard force down onto his skull. First, a bright white light then his whole body juddered with a bolt of searing pain. His world shrank down into an abyss and finally blackened.

Behind them, the Major's eyes were set in that same awful stare as he sank below the surface of the bottle-green pool, with hardly a ripple, followed quickly by Ambrose St John Palgrave's body, which was pushed into the pool, together with the cross bow. When all were submerged, the shadow slipped away as

soundlessly as it had come, silhouetted for a brief moment against the lighter horizon, before it slunk away into cover of the whispering beech copse. Thunder coughed a warning of an approaching storm. A quickening breeze breathed across the swimming pool and lapped the shuddering water up the slimed sides.

A sudden flash of lightning earthed on the deep end and a few bubbles floated to the top of the deathly silent pool, until the last one burst like a tiny secret in the enveloping stillness. Cooling rain began to plop in humongous drops on the pool and would soon wash the whole garden clean.

NEMESIS

Francesca and Graham. The perfect couple. Or that was how it had all begun. From their lavishly celebrated nuptials seven years ago, to this. Fran, it seemed to Graham had become very distant during the last six months. So, now, here he was, a spy in his own house, lying inside a sleeping bag on the rafters of his own loft, listening to the incessant rain beating a headache-inducing tattoo on the roof tiles and all because he had his suspicions that below him were his Fran and her new lover. He felt the affair in his waters, as his mother used to say. Fran thought Graham was away on a work conference, 'The Art of Selling Almost Anything', but he had phoned her from his mobile to say he had been called to Head Office for a few days and would be stopping in Town. He told her he was not sure how long he might be. She seemed to be only half listening, which was typical these days. Always distracted. Another sign, he mused. Well. that had only made it easier for him to appear vague. It suited his purposes. He had stayed away for two days then doubled back, letting himself in to await 'happenings' while he was hidden away in the loft. He felt sure the inconvenience would be worth it and he would be proved right. He hadn't had to wait too long before he heard muffled noises downstairs, as they let themselves in. They had gone into the bedroom almost immediately and their voices had remained in low tones for quite some while.

The rain hadn't stopped falling in the area for days, and showed no signs of doing so. Earlier, it wasn't the only noise he had heard from his claustrophobic, dusty eyrie either. The other noises were the sounds of a happy couple in his bedroom, under his rich wine and gold embossed counterpane. They were abandoned, frenetic, passion-filled sounds and the reason he was

hiding, lying low like Anne Frank in World War 2. How he could sympathise with *her* plight now. He had to bide his time. Put aside any impatience he might feel and hang on in for as long as it took. And that wasn't going to be long. Revenge is a dish best eaten cold. His mother, again. The rain threatened to break the tiles in its ferocity and Graham looked at the luminous dial on his expensive gold Rolex, given to him as a wedding gift by his once-loving wife, Fran. Three a.m. The house was silent except for the drumming downpour and the occasional stirrings of mice he never knew they had. Still, it didn't matter now, did it?

There she was, down below him in *his* bedroom, in *his*, well, *their* bed with her new six-pack lover. Graham could see him in his mind's eye. Young, virile, all the things she must have decided *he* wasn't. She told him she was staying with one of her three sisters at the other side of town. Another insult, Graham thought, to his intelligence. They, Fran and her family, were very close. Always letting themselves in and out of his house and treating it as if it was their second home. He hadn't minded at first but lately they never knew who would drop in and when. Still, it was a while since he and Fran had been in any what he might have called 'compromising positions'. No worries there.

He stared at a lacy cobweb in the rafters and went over in his mind for the umpteenth time what might have gone wrong between them. The perfect couple. He had always known Francesca didn't exactly approve of his occupation. Not 'manly' enough he supposed. He sold glass angels and birds, china figurines, and a line in Toby jugs which were very popular with pub landlords, to display above the bar in old country inns. He felt as if Fran would have liked him to fight fires or arrest criminals perhaps. She even commented that he resembled one or two of his Toby jugs and nicknamed him her little 'hugsy jugsy' which irritated Graham whenever he heard it. She seemed to

know what he was thinking and used it even more. Still, it paid the bills and she was grateful for that. Her own work as a fashion designer in Town could be spasmodic at best and non-existent at worst. Dear Graham. As boring as he was reliable. He imagined her telling this to her young Adonis, over a romantic dinner for two in Carlo's downtown Italian plush restaurant. Her favourite one. Now he realised why the waiters gave him pitying looks when he, her own husband, took her there. And only last month as well.

Enough. He'd had enough of being played for a fool. Tonight, he would make her, them, pay. The rain played on the loft dormer window like a dozen demented percussion players until he thought it might shatter. He listened again. All remained quiet below. He might make a move. He assured himself that he had in mind what he would use for his task and it was, ironically, already there, in the bedroom. The other little helper he would need was in his pocket. Slowly Graham eased his aching limbs out of the sleeping bag and swung his stiff legs onto the boards, praying at the same time that the floor would not creak. It didn't, so he pulled himself to a hunched standing position in the cramped loft and began to lower himself very cautiously down onto the red carpet underneath. The one they had chosen so carefully together all those hopeful years ago. Thank God they had paid a premium for a more expensive grade, with a high wool content so that it gave him a soft surface now. It would be extremely useful for deadening any sound on his way along the short corridor to the bedroom.

He suddenly found himself wanting to cough. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, pinched his nose and prayed. He had to emit a strange low snivel even so and stood still until it had passed, listening intently all the while. He couldn't help remembering how it was always at the most inconvenient moments that a bodily function crept up. Like sneezing when you had a mouthful of

porridge or scrambled eggs. He pulled himself up short and listened again. He took a few steps along the hall towards his bedroom – *their* room, he kept thinking and steeled himself to open the door before there were any movements and his chance was gone. The door, he knew, was smooth opening. Not usually any creaks or scrapings. That was to his advantage now. And all this time, the rain continued to chatter on the roof. It was helpfully creating a noise which covered some of his movements. That and the rising wind. How handy and he normally hated bad weather.

He could just imagine them together in his King size satin bed even before he'd entered the darkened room. His flesh crept. The drapes at the other side of the room were moving in the breeze and he could smell an expensive new perfume. He must have treated her. It was mixed with a designer aftershave he recognised as one he had tried himself, in-store once, in the days when she had been interested in shopping together. The smell of death came in many guises, he thought. Not just the white arum lilies she had placed on the dressing table. Graham let his eyes become more accustomed to the gloom but it was still velvet dark. Only vague shapes showed. Yes. Still there, where it was always kept. The white vase that was shaped like a bat used for playing the childhood game of rounders. A long slim neck, perfect for grasping tight, and a very heavy bulbous end, so he knew it would pack more than enough punch for its task. He tiptoed to the dressing table to reach it, and for one heart-stopping second had to freeze in the shadow behind the door, clutching the vase, as one of them shifted in the bed. He closed his eyes. All quiet again so he inched forward toward them. Two shapes, mounds, lying close together breathing almost simultaneously.

Oh, God. At this thought, Graham became so full of hatred and pent-up anger that it burst out of him in a roar of frenzied poisonous blind rage. In the cavern-like

darkness, he lunged at the two sleeping figures, bringing the vase down so hard on first the woman's tousled hair, beating it harder and harder, then turning on *him,* Mr Wonderful, locked in her arms. Graham raised his self-styled club time after time until he could hardly stand up himself and felt all the pain and tension of the last few hours drain away. He kept himself together sufficiently to take a cigarette lighter out of his trouser pocket, and set alight the brocade curtains. Licking flames soon began to spread until the room was glowing water-melon pink, like a sunset he and Fran had seen once over the mountains in Africa. When he was satisfied the bedcovers were ablaze, he quickly closed the door, turned the tiny gold key in the lock and pushed it back under the door. Then he ran along the passageway, past other bedrooms, the bathroom, her dressing-room and started to feel his way downstairs. When he had tried to switch the light on, he had found the power was off, due to the storm, he assumed.

He was picking his way down when his feet felt something creep up his legs and soak into his trousers, making them clingy and slimy. It was freezing dank-smelling water. Graham realised that with so much rain falling for so long, the nearby river must have burst its banks. The house had become flooded so there ceased to be a way out for him downwards, as the wooden spiral steps could not be seen now under the rapidly rising water level.

He turned in his tracks and retraced his steps, in pitch dark, except for the line of bright orange light beneath the fated bedroom door. He could hear the roar and crackle of the flames taking hold inside. He ran to the loft ladder steps, pulled himself back up into his eyrie at the top of the soon to the raging inferno that was his treasured, once happy house. He put his head in his hands and couldn't help seeing the crazy irony of waiting for rescue. He began to beat his head with his clammy, shaking fists, pulling at his sparse hair in

alternate motions. A different noise could be heard now above the fire below him and Graham sat still for a moment. He soon realised it was the chudder chudder of a helicopter, no doubt police rescue, approaching from a distance away. The sound grew louder until it became obvious it was hovering over his house. Sweating and confused, Graham knew it was his only chance of survival. He worked out quickly, when he'd pulled himself together, that he would have to put a credible spin on the story that was unfolding in his house. With luck, he could pull it off and if not, well, he would take his chances. Whatever they were.

This was the first. He climbed up to the dormer window on a shaky chair then pushed it open and waved frantically with his less than pristine white handkerchief. The one Fran always told him looked as if it had been used to clean the chimney before she grabbed it to throw in the washing machine. But it was all he had now and the colour didn't matter. He waved and waved it until the helicopter pilot must have seen the desperate movements as he dropped even lower and put a winch down. Graham was pulled unceremoniously through the window and swung precariously up, his heart in his mouth, into the leggety creature waiting to swallow him into its belly. It was then he saw that there were two other occupants already in the puttering helicopter. His wife, Fran, and her sister Kate. His heart almost stopped. Fran told him she had been staying with Kate for a couple of days when they had both been caught out by the swiftness of the rising waters. and had had to climb out onto a flat roof. Kate was sobbing intermittently so it was Fran who shouted over the wind noise to tell Graham she would explain later. Something about their youngest sister, Alex, being missing with her new boyfriend. Family trouble. She hadn't wanted to worry him. Kate sobbed even louder and became almost inconsolable.

Graham's eyes took on a frightening fixed stare.

When Fran asked him what the hell had been going on, he found he had lost his voice. Even on his scalp, the roots of his hair felt as if they were creeping with some kind of maggots. He thought they might crawl down his face and eat into his eyes. His whole body suddenly gave a huge shudder. His limbs were heavy, as if they were not part of his body and he felt hot and cold alternately. 'That's trauma for you', the medic reassured Fran. 'He'll be just fine when we've checked him over in hospital.'

The kind assistant asked Graham if he had been in the house alone but was met with the same blank eyes in a lardy, rancid-white, almost waxen face. As they rose into the inky purple sky, Graham looked down for a fleeting moment, in mute horror, shaking so badly his teeth chattered. He took the blanket offered. Just as they were pulling away from the house, the pilot suddenly announced he had seen flames coming out of a lower bedroom window. He began turning to go back to take another look while messaging to those on the ground that they had a problem. Back up services were needed. The helicopter dropped. The heavy door slid open. Graham closed his eyes and quite suddenly got the scent of those arum lilies in his nostrils.

The smell of …He knew what he must do.

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

"Good morning. You are through to 'From Grief to Leaf'. Andrew speaking. How may I help?"

"Oh, hello…yes, she liked oak trees…"

"Sorry, sir?"

"Yes, it was definitely oaks she liked best…you *are* the people who offer a tree planted in memory of a loved one, aren't you?"

"That's correct, we are, sir…could I have your name?"

"My name is…actually, it doesn't matter…yet. I am considering doing business with your company as I may like to plant a tree for my dear wife, Ada. She, er…went over to the 'other side' last week. Excuse me if I'm not quite myself."

"Of course, of course, that's our job. Discretion and sympathy, sir."

"That's good. How does it all work, may I ask?"

"Well, whenever you feel you are ready, we discuss with you which tree your loved one would have preferred, and then we will order that species for you and plant it in our wood of remembrance...Sorry sir?"

"I said, where is it? This wood. What's it called?"

"Foreverland. It's off the Salisbury A-road, between Old Copse and Ashbourne villages. A quieter, more peaceful spot you'll never find, sir. Absolutely idyl…"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure it is. How is payment arranged?"

"Sure, sir. I was coming to that. Our idyllic wood gives your loved one company as well as being part of an ecological conservation project in the area. What could be nicer than your late wife, was it Ada? sir, giving oxygen back to the world and providing a habitat for birds and other wild life at the same…"

"Yes, yes, it sounds wonderful. She would love…er…have loved…all that. Sorry, forgive me. And payment?"

"Will it be ashes or willow coffin? …Sir?...Sorry…no, don't worry yet…when you decide to go ahead with us…"

"I have decided, I *will* go ahead."

"That's grand, sir, if I can take your name? Then I'll post…"

"Actually, I'd prefer to come in to your office to settle up."

"Yes, that's fine, sir. When can we expect you?"

"As soon as I…er, can. Very soon."

"Thank you, sir, we look forward to doing business with you."

And Gerald popped the receiver on its cradle to await his wife's arrival home from her shopping trip. When she parked in the garage, he went out to meet her by the side kitchen door.

Crazy Ada, poor cow, Ada, his wife of fifty long years who had driven him to…anyway, she lived for using his plastic. She had been getting phone calls of late. Ones that she always tried to hide from him. He had his suspicions. Always tarting herself up. Shopping in the city was *her* scene. She hated the countryside for its dirty isolation and claustrophobic woodland. Was scared of birds and all furry wild life in any shape or form. Said it made her 'creep out'. It would serve her right. He *might* go back to Foreverland every now and then to water her. Maybe take bread to encourage the birds. Sort of 'corpse to copse' - yes, he liked that. Hey, but *not* via cops, eh, my old son? No, definitely not that and Gerald's thin, wry smile widened.

"Hello, my dear. Good shop? Stay there, my sweet, I have a surprise for you."

And the electric garage door slid silently down.

REPRISALS

A fog of unease hung in the stewed air. She sat in the rancid back street diner, thinking and smoking. A weak blue neon sign sputtered and crackled, raw rain mizzled depressingly. The sign should have read Lucky Hank's but the wind had played havoc with the letters. One or two hung down, swinging precariously to and fro, so some joker had graffitied his own ideas in the gaps. Nibbling her blueberry muffin, Carmina pictured her husband Frankie. Slumped over the kitchen table in his grubby black singlet, he would be pouring milk straight into the economy size box of Chokka Flakes, as if he'd never heard of plates and grunting like a pig, spitting the sharp bits out from between his gold fillings. That's if he *was* home yet. No, probably not. Another night out, which is why she was here, thinking.

'I'm saving you work, hot-babe,' he'd say, when what he really meant was, 'I'm a slob, put up or ignore me.'

So, she usually did. Ignore him, that is. Unless she wanted to rifle through his well-padded wallet. Now, that was worth a wheedling flirty minute or two. And she, Carmina-Grace, was well versed in the 'arts of men'. A card-carrying expert at…well, yes, card-carrying. What she couldn't buy on plastic wasn't worth having. Meeting Frankie all those twenty years ago had allowed her to buy whatever she wanted, within, no, *without* reason, and this she had done. In style. BIG style. Frankie had been fine with it all. But that was then. Now, he went around telling folk she'd cleaned him out long since, when Carmina knew a different story. His underground activities still continued, sleazy as ever. Behind his back, she found out from Ruby, her best friend, their money was being gambled, drunk and other things she said she would not mention. Ruby could be relied upon to dish the truth when she was plied with

a few Tequila shooters. Frankie suspected as much but never said so.

Two days ago, when Ruby had been found, in the low-down motel Nirvana where she plied her trade, with her throat cut, Carmina knew that Frank was behind it. Ruby had always kept her in the loop. This time, it had been in the form of a warning to Carmina that her doting Frank had been seen with Oz's wife, Evaline, more than once, in out of town rendezvous, by different folk; reliable ones, Ruby said, raising her kohl black eyebrows, and giving that wink. And Oz 'The Dog' Zane was not to be …again, the wink.

'Just a word to the wise, know what I mean, sweet pea? If I were you, honey, I'd sleep with one eye open. That woman Evaline is a crazy head-case. A real weirdo if you want my opinion.' These were Ruby's words to her friend. Her last as it turned out. They said there was a lot of blood. That was Rubes to a 'T', always generous in a crisis. Poor tart. Carmina stubbed her smoke out in the vase with the wilted daisy and began to gag on the last dregs of coffee. She would make Frankie pay. God knows, she had paid her own dues with the stinking pimp for long enough. Drugs and gun running amongst mean low life. He had changed so much in the last ten years, after meeting scum like Lenny and Oz, the Zane twins, AKA, The Bruise Brothers. Mess with those two only if you didn't mind your face rearranged, or your parting used for a letter rack. They were big into child prostitution stuff right now, trafficking kids to scummy drifter parents who in turn rented the poor kids out. What the hell was Frank messin' in? And way over his head, she guessed. Money laundering had been, so far, more *his* style. That loveable cow Ruby had been a way-back good friend to her and she didn't deserve that. She'd just known too much for her own good and opened her scarlet diva glossy mouth once too often. Carmina-Grace's lips tightened and pursed, as she vowed a determination to

avenge her friend's violent demise. She left the diner, cursing when she broke a manicured green nail as she slammed the sticking door behind her. That could be Frank's fault, too. Why not? Bloody men. It's always all about *them*. She'd go back to their condo in down-town New York to prepare her plan. No second rate bungled idea for her. This one *would* work.

Galvanised into action, she walked as fast as her needle heels would allow, her face set in an expression of mean intent that suited her. Dirty packets, empty Noodle boxes and holed plastic bags blew around the half-deserted Avenue. A yellow taxi honked as he passed, splashing her legs with spray from the gutter. Carmina mouthed 'bastard' after him then almost tripped on a can that rolled across her path. A raking wind whipped about, combined with the smell of putrid old burger boxes and greasy cooking oil that wafted out of 'On The Run,' one of Ruby's favoured dives, She heard strains of Elvis Presley's Heartbreak Hotel from the juke-box. Yes, very fitting, Rubes, baby, sorry. Carmina stopped for a second or two. She made the sign of the cross and whispered a soft 'Hail Mary' for her friend.

In the cramped space they called home, she threw her gear across the scratched beech table, grabbed a beer from the fridge and sprawled along the soft red leather sofa, their only luxury, the TV set on a low mumble, as disjointed images flashed across the screen. Riots, hurricanes and flooding skittered in front of her. She glanced at the table. No sign of a bowl. A newspaper lay open on the sports page and yesterday's creased linen jacket hung over his chair. Obviously, he never came in last night so it would be early tomorrow morning, she guessed. She poured herself a beer right now, cool on her throat, refreshing. She lay back and let herself ride on a wave of pleasure.

Once he was gone for two weeks and just sauntered in while she was in the bath one evening late, demanding steak and salad. When she looked like

complaining how late it was, he just barked out, 'and make it medium rare, Mina, my pussy cat.' She knew if she wanted to keep her eyes clear of a rainbow hue tomorrow, steak was on the menu. At least the men she went with never wanted feeding or their dirty socks laundered. A whole lot of other exhausting demands, mind you, but not those. This half-life sometimes really got to her, but what else could a girl like her do? One with no education to speak of, bills to pay if Frank abdicated his responsibilities when he said business was bad. Which was often, lately.

It seemed like Ruby was now the catalyst instead. She would have liked that idea. Probably would have thought it was that thing that turned into a butterfly. She was like that, Ruby was. And Carmina could see her give that wink again in her mind's eye. So, her plan hatched as she lay in front of the TV. As she closed her eyes, she thought of possible flaws in the plan but went off to sleep before any got a chance to surface. She dreamed of Ruby flying round as a grotesque black butterfly, which kept attaching itself to her hair, until she woke, beating her arms above her head and gasping for air. Turning over on the warm, cosy sofa, she gave up the idea she should be in bed, closed her eyes and slept until the ball alarm rang. She groaned, threw it against the far wall, then crawled downstairs to make tea. Carpe diem, sister, she whispered to herself as she took a sip and lit up the first of what could be forty ciggies. She prepared to action her plan, working slowly and methodically by the sink until she was satisfied she was ready.

Everything looked normal when, half an hour later, she heard a car door slam in the road below and she imagined Frank's flat size tens planting themselves on the WELCOME mat. He fiddled about on the doorstep for what felt like forever, so she guessed he was struggling to find the right key. Eventually, the door almost fell open, as he put his considerable weight

behind it and then lurched uncertainly across the hallway. She could smell the foul mix of drink and garlic. After yelling out to her, and waiting long enough for her to answer, he thankfully headed straight into the spare bedroom, where she heard him swear and curse, before the sound of the shower drowned out the rest. She thought of Ruby and guessed where he'd probably been. With that bitch wife of Oz's. She felt the hair on her neck tingle and her scalp prickle.

She crept away from the door and went back into the kitchen to put the kettle on again. It hissed evilly, conspiratorially, as it boiled. Carmina smiled as she scraped charcoal from her toast. Really, she enjoyed the idea of a cremated offering. Nasty. She licked butter slowly round her full lips, stabbing at the teabag until she felt calmer. She shivered. Her plan was ready to action. Stacking the few dirty items into the 'WashanGo' on the drainer, she took Frankie's favourite coffee mug from the shelf, and placed two heaped spoonfuls of coffee into it. She took a small, blue vial already prepared with oxalic acid, made from boiling the leaves of the rhubarb plant. Fast acting, negligible smell or taste, practically untraceable. All the fruit pies they had enjoyed of late took on a whole new meaning. Frank loved rhubarb. So did she. So useful to keep by. Make use of it all.

Carmina boiled the kettle and dropped crystals from the contents of the vial into Frank's coffee. She stirred it carefully, added three spoonfuls of sugar, then, after wiping the outside of it clean, she hid the bottle in the deep hidden pocket of her capacious bag. She washed her hands three times, smoothed her hair, slicked her dry lips with 'Forever True', and carried the mug into Frankie as she usually did before work. He always pretended to be asleep. They both played their little charade each day. He was snoring like a stuck pig when Carmina put the mug beside the crumpled bed. True to form, he called,

"Hey, is that you, honey bee?"

"Sure is, sweetie. Here's your coffee. I'm outa here now."

"Ok, ok, tumbleweed. Soothe this helluva headache, will ya honey? I'm not feelin' too great right now."

"Gee, you know I can't, Frank. Clients waiting, bills to pay, lover boy. Drink this nice cuppa coffee for me, that'll help. You're dehydrated, serves ya right, Frankie."

"Yeh, yeh, I hear ya, baby. You have a good day, honey," and he gave her a knowing wink.

She stared at him for what felt like a lifetime, smiled sweetly, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. See ya, punk. He lay back, eyes closed, ashen pale. Carmina slipped out. She always left him to it. He always downed it in one then slept for hours. She grabbed her bag, took a thin jacket and slammed the screen door out to the street, She wanted to throw up. A yellow cab whisked her off and she breathed again as it took her further and further away to her first filthy rich client. Transport provided. Mask on, my girl, for Ruby.

On her return to the flat in the evening, she knew exactly what she had to do. She went immediately into the bedroom, steeling herself as she did so, and trying hard not to look at Frank lying motionless, face down in the bed, quickly removing the coffee cup, and swilling what surprised her to be most of the coffee still in there away down the sink. No problem. It had obviously not taken much to do the job. But that was fine. The end result was exactly what she had planned. Carefully drying the cup up, and replacing it in the cupboard, after another check around, she picked up the phone.

"911…Which service do you require?...Hello?? Are you still there?"

Carmina's head was full of hammers banging to get out. She gave loud sobs.

"Give me the police, please, …quick, I think he's

dead. Maybe not… I don't know…"

"One second, ma'am, where are you calling from?"

"For Gods sake…er…"

"Calm down, ma'am, I need an address, please."

"Oh, yeh, sorry….it's just that…oh, shit…help."

"An address, please."

"Hell, yeh, yeh, 1047 er…north Avenue, Parkway Thirteen. Oh, hurry…" she acted hyperventilation.

"Thank you, ma'am. Take it easy. Who's dead?"

"It's my husband, he's…he's…well…he's dead. I've just found him. I've gotten in late from work and there he was…is…dead. Oh, God…help me…police, police…"

"Putting you through now, ma'am. Sit down. Stay calm."

More hammers nailing into her skull. Rats gnawing their way out of her head through her eyes. Stay cool, sister.

Two medics arrived first and pronounced Frank dead at the scene just before a smart police cruiser with flashing lights and a wailing siren brought Special Deputy Carter Everett and his Officer Melvin Denton to North Avenue to interview Carmina, the grieving widow. She was not surprised to see these two. Lately, they seemed to be calling round to see Frankie almost regular, about 'stuff' he had told her to keep out of. This time, they took statements from her and appeared satisfied with her account of events on her arrival back from work, when she had found her husband, God rest his soul, stone cold, choked on his own vomit. She had sobbed 'til her throat ached and half a bottle of best Cognac was administered. Two more 'Hail Marys.' The nice Officers were so sympathetic. They told her forensics would be around shortly. Frankie, she whispered, was…had been…her whole world. They nodded and said they would be in touch shortly to finalise details when the post mortem was complete.

As soon as they had left, Carmina began to panic, BIG TIME. The post mortem…if it threw up any unforeseen flaws, she was as good as dead herself. Well, worse, as she was so claustrophobic and couldn't contemplate being sent to jail for what would be a life term. She couldn't bear being shut in, all those keys turning behind her as she was taken into the bowels of some god-awful prison. To her, it would be a slow lingering death. If she was lucky, one of the other lifers might stab her before she razored her own wrists. Or how about hanging? God, what was she thinking? She dragged herself off to bed, tossing and turning all night, twisted visions of Ruby's face distorted in front of her. Blood everywhere. Even running down the walls. She woke screaming as honey sunlight spilled into her room. This pain that threatened to explode her crazed head was all going to come out, it was…it was…oh god. her head was thumping, her eyes burned as if nails were being beaten through from the other side. She rode the panic out until it had subsided enough for her to gain control of her breathing.

The next few days proved to be a mix of highs and lows and Carmina had to dig deep into her mental resources in order to keep her head straight. Just as she had calmed her mood swings, she was on the sofa drinking tea, when she heard the thump of heavy business-like feet coming up stairs. The silhouettes of the familiar two police officers showed on the glass. The old panic rushed back, worse than before. The terrible claustrophobia of jail gripped her by the throat and threatened to suffocate her. The knocking continued, more loudly now. They obviously meant business. This was it…her last chance before they took her away. She groped her way to get the blue vial from her bag. Hyperventilation was starting to set in but she found a latent strength to pour the remaining crystals into her cup of tea. She called, 'Ok, ok…' and moved unsteadily to open the door.

"Good morning, Ma'am, may we come in? We have more details of your late husband's death."

She let them in and followed them into the kitchen where they squared up to her, ready to release information. Carmina looked nervously at them and hoped it wasn't too obvious.

"Ma'am, the results of both the post mortem and toxicology tests have come through. They show that your husband was poisoned."

Carmina showed signs of collapse.

"Steady now, ma'am. Let's sit you down." He continued,

"It appears he was otherwise in average to good health for his age, but tests have revealed that a certain Evaline Zane, with whom he was having a long running affair, laced a meal he took with her the night before he died with a fatal dose of painkillers like Tylanol, after he had finished the affair. This took its time to act. Although, it's surprising your husband was still relatively responsive when you left him, that morning. Did you say he had a bad headache?'

She nodded.

"Sorry, Ma'am. Were you aware of this liason?"

Carmina shook her head slowly, her eyes wide with growing realisation of the horror the situation now threw up.

"Are you sure about all this, officer?" She managed to push the words out of her dry mouth.

'We know it was administered to his meal as they both ate the same meal, according to stomach contents found at your husband's post mortem. The whole affair had turned very nasty, with her husband, Oz, threatening to throw her out and your husband Frank with a knee-capping if he didn't do the decent thing and take her off his hands. She'd chosen Frank over him. This was one mad er…lady, ma'am. She took the law into her own hands, to punish Frank. She's under arrest, as she confessed to his murder by poisoning his

meal. She cracked under questioning, ma'am.'

Silence deafened Carmina. Then she spoke, in a strangulated half whisper,

"So why the hell didn't my husband go away with the bitch?"

"He refused to leave you, ma'am. You can at least hold on to that. Small consolation, I realise, so sorry."

Carmina had a sudden flash of realisation. No mention of oxalic acid.

Painkillers, yes, but not…

Shaking violently, through a thickening black murk around her, she could barely hear,

"Er,…ma'am? Ma'am…are you ok?"

She began to slide to the floor.

"Here, drink the tea, ma'am."

"Ma'am?"

R T A

A helluva bang then…blood. Everywhere. Never seen so much in my life, sheltered as it may have been, according to the gospel that is my sister. Minding my own, I was, when the fucker just jumped under my wheels. What's a girl to do? Exactly, reader. And that's what I did. Slammed them on. Hard. But too late, as it turned out. Car skidded at first. Slewed across Gaunt Road and pointed down Old Hollow Lane before I looked. Poor bastard. Hadn't stood a chance. Runnels of the dark red stuff spreading over the spooky soundless oily road. More and more. Couldn't have had much left. I shut my eyes. Realised that wouldn't help.

When I opened them, it was the other eyes. Staring. Wide. Dark as pools. And the sleek flat black hair. Oozing intestines like gob on the rain-slimed tarmac. I wanted to throw up. I glanced at the car. I knew Steve would want to know. A side panel. Beating out job, I heard him say. Could be worse. Then he'd ask about me. Come to think of it, I did catch a stripe of Old Brock. Just before it happened. And to think. Road kill. Some folk eat this.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

My friend, the local shop assistant, said she would be in any day. That he'd seen her before, and knew what she was like. He had a gut feeling we would get on. Well, 'click together' was what he actually said, as if he knew how lonely I really was since Mother died. Funny how some folk just understand. Although, on reflection now, I remember seeing the guy winking and smiling at Sally across on the till. I wondered if she really would be my type. After all, why should I trust this young whippersnapper to know what or who I like? Maybe the bloke has even fancied her himself and they have history. He looked the sort with a roving eye. But I needn't have worried. She was here with me now in the tiny flat I had shared with Mother and it was working out, so that was all that mattered. And we really do click. Eve and me. Well, strange how even our names click. Adam and Eve. I'm always telling her how much her name suits her and that she's better than all the rest have ever been. That is all the rest our dear Mother knew about, before her untimely demise of a paralysing stroke which had kept her prisoner in her own body until a merciful God ended her misery and she was found dead at the bottom of the stairs one morning by our cleaner. Poor dear soul. Such a sad business for all of us. Mother was my whole world. After all, she had devoted all of her life to me, and me to her, since Pops died five years ago.

None of my lady friends appealed to her when I introduced them. Well, I could read Mother's eyes. She hated them taking my attention, any fool could see that. She always told me that no one would be good enough for her Bubbsy, a nickname she gave me when I was a kid and we used to blow big soapy bubbles together in the bath. She had photos and threatened to show them to my lady visitors if I kept them at home too long.

Said no one would ever love me like she would.

Take shy Eileen, the first girlfriend Mother met long before her stroke.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs Wilson. Adam's told me lots about you."

"Uumm. I expect he has. He tells me er, 'things' about you too. Still, I'm sure my son knows best. No. no, don't sit in that chair, it's mine. Adam bought it for my birthday. And not *that* one either, what did he say your name was? That chair's Adam's. Never sits in any other. It was a present from me, you see. Yes, that little stool will be alright. There's nothing of you, anyhow. A yard of pump water, we used to say. Could do with a good roast dinner. Adam couldn't do without mine, you know. Says he's never tasted anything quite so delicious anywhere. Have you dear? You're quiet, son. Cat got your tongue?"

"Yeh, great roasts, Mother. Eileen can cook, you know. Made me a wonderful paella the other day."

"What, that French muck? Didn't you tell her you were allergic to it love?"

"He really did enjoy it, Mrs Wilson. *And* the wine."

"Hmph…I don't hold with alcohol, never have, since his Dad drank himself to death. And me without the faintest idea why."

Eileen hasn't been over the doorstep since. And Mother without a clue why.

Together with half a dozen other girls she deemed unsuitable over the last ten years; pretty Florence, fun-loving Sandra and the lovely Diana, the one with eyes the colour of lapis lazuli and a voice that ran over my ears like melting honey. Actually, I rather liked…still, all hit the deck under Mother's scrutiny, born of much practice. She told me to get rid of each in turn. But now she's gone and I'm free to do as I please, with whom I please. And Eve is it. We are so well suited, why would I need to look any further for a life-partner. I even think Mother would have approved my choice, something I'm

always telling Eve. She's never moody, like Mother and all the damn rest of them. Never knew where you were with them. Up one minute, down the next. Fuss this, mind that. Eve's different. Always calm, unstressed and there for me. Not like Caprice.

Now Mother had certainly been right about *that* one. Little tart wasn't the half of it. Caprice once told Mother where she had a special tattoo of my name. Well that was that. Get shot of her, Mother said. Not to mention Ursula, and that red-headed sister of hers, Carla Rose. Actually I took to Carla and we used to smoke out of the window in my bedroom until Mother removed the lock from my door. 'Bitches, the pair of them, or I'll eat my own wedding hat,' Mum said and made us a cup of our favourite cocoa. We toasted good riddance to the lot. Danced me round the tiny sitting room and then we talked about old times when the sun shone all day and there were fairy cakes for tea. That was then.

I'm looking at Eve right now, waiting here on my bed, patiently lying in late afternoon sun, and I can't help thinking how lucky I am. Her shapely breasts, and tempting mouth, like it's stained with blackberry wine. I feel the blade of the long knife with my fingertips, see the sun dazzle on the sharp steel and keep reminding myself she is different. Eve is not like all the rest. This will not be necessary. But I pleasure her by sliding the blade in an arc round her smooth pale throat, along and down her sternum, when suddenly I can't take the pressure of that calm expression any more. I let the knife-tip push against her once too often but I don't seem to care now. My weight falls on top of her and I am stabbing, stabbing, again and again until I can feel something trickle out of her. Her slender fingers are trembling and I feel the movement in those long, creamy thighs. A twisted crooked macabre face grins up at me. The air in the inflatable dummy is escaping. I look into Eve's big soulful eyes and Mother stares back.

THE GIRL WHO LOVED NIGHTMARES

'Nightmares? Oh, yeh, I think I was born with a couple of them already in my head.' That's Violet, my elder sister. 'Like someone else was in my head before me, yeh, a sort of 'hand-me-down head', huh?' I laughed but it always made me have a prickly feeling under the back of my neck.

She said they must have bred there because, even before she was six, she had enjoyed quite a few. Handy, they were, she told me, as she learned fast that they could get her lots of attention, which was sadly lacking in our house back then, both for us kids *and* our blurry parents. The crazy dreams got her cuddles, milky drinks and sometimes she was allowed back downstairs; 'just for a weeny while, darling, until you feel happy again. There, there…' If we became ill in the daytime, Mother used to tell us to go to our room, draw the curtains then we'd 'feel better'. Well, it worked for Violet but never for me. We quarrelled about how dark the room should be if we *both* fell ill. Vi usually got her way. Mother would give us red cushions to rest our heads on. She loved all shades of red. Said it made her happy.

Happy was a loaded word in our home. Violet said it was over-rated, that is if it existed at all. She said she had a problem with it. 'Happy happy happy, dears, let's all be happy. Birds in the nest must all agree.' This was our wispy haired Mother's motto. She was wispy on top and all the way down; a slight, vague pale lady who would suddenly disappear upstairs at the drop of a china tea-cup, to the sacred confines of her scarlet 'boudoir,' saying she must 'not be disturbed until dinner, dears.' She floated off in one of her concoctions of black lace and silk, sighing as if her body would break under the strain of it all, to have what Father called her 'turn'. Even he, *especially* he, was not allowed into the crimson velvet curtained, cashmere-cushioned temple and no-one

ever questioned it. After a short while, a smell of patchouli and sandalwood crept out under the door and oozed from the keyhole, so we presumed this was all part of 'the turn' We would notice that the curtains were closed in the brightness of midday from the path under her window and remained closed until the sky bruised purple and sun glowed low on the horizon.

Then, Mother would emerge, blinking into the light, a changed person, all the paleness of her complexion changed to a healthier pink. Was Mother 'happy'? Neither I nor Violet ever enquired.

'Maud, it's none of our business,' my sister told me, which, considering she was my senior by three years at eleven, she thought this sufficient to close the matter down. I always concurred, for a quiet life. My sister Vi could be scary and never actually considered she may be wrong. About anything, really. Pipsqueak Maud Agnes had to toe the line if she knew what was good for her.

'Very wise, child,' Father would nod towards me, 'very wise,' before disappearing himself, wreathed in ghostly, ethereal tobacco smoke, to his sacrosanct 'den,' which stank of whiskey, a man's shaving soap and a cheap eau de cologne Mother had brought back for him from one of her 'travels'. The flock wallpaper had yellowed to the colour of butter on the turn, its design of once colourful peacocks, leaping gazelle, humming birds and tropical vines long since faded to an anaemic wash, suffocated under tobacco fog. We often heard him cough alarmingly in there, so I think my sister and I often worried that with Mother's turns and our Father's bronchial wheezing, we may easily be left orphaned, and sent to the 'Convent and Industrial School For Under-Privileged Minors,' on the other side of town, a thing we dreaded. It had happened to Mary and Dorothy Murphy only last month and we heard their hearts and spirits had been broken, in its cruel regime, their parents having been killed together in a horrific car crash on the way home from visiting friends. Their younger brother,

George Charles, took fright when his Aunt Maeve told him, waited 'til they were all in bed that night, then ran 'pell mell away,' according to the grief stricken Aunt, never to be seen again. It was 'not to be thought about,' according to Violet, 'as it's enough to turn us wacko with worry. I'll not hear about it again.' This was her way of coping. That and cultivating nightmares. Maybe it was how she managed her nightmares, even saying she liked them, as they, 'let me have adventures,' saying this with a wink of her eye at me. Violet said, that, to her, it felt as if boredom leaked tangibly from 'every pore of this house.' She said she could see it dripping slowly down the walls. I used to lie in bed and think about that. Myself, I never saw it.

Although I was sceptical, me being terrified of any nasty I might dream, I could see she was genuine. When questioned about them, she would take me into the strange world of her dreams. A world inhabited by elephants that emerged out of tree trunks and flew at you with flashing lurid red eyes and humungous rat-like creatures that swarmed after you as you tried to run ahead of them down a never-ending tunnel. She had hidden behind 'happy' for as long as she could, but life for Vi in our isolated house, Tamarisk, became more and more of a tedious bore. So the nightmares, she claimed, were 'necessary evils,' and laughed at her own words. When she said these things at school, things took a turn in a different direction. Her friends were derisory of her claims that 'nightmares are fun.' They said she was mad and some said, in particular Ethlyn McCarthy, that she 'should be locked up,' and that both Vi and myself were hateful. One kid's parents sent a message to the teacher that a pupil named Violet Shannon was telling nightmare stories that had made their daughter Sinead too frightened to go to bed. Lots of other kids developed OCD rituals, checking warily *under* the bed before they would get in it. There was a recurring nightmare my sister recounted that sent them running, about a one-

eyed scarecrow that sank slowly into the corn field if you looked at it, only to return as a silver, disc-headed monster that barred your path when you walked away. When you ran, he ran. You had to keep running 'til you woke up. One day, she said what if it caught up with…she never finished the sentence, only shivered.

Violet gradually talked less and less about her 'adventures.' She became secretive and would not be drawn on them, saying, 'some of you will find out one day.' Of course, this made the other kids worry even more, to the point that she was left friendless, to hang around in the corner of the playground by herself, on the bench under the rowan tree, sometimes with only me for company, which she claimed 'embarrassed' her, so eventually I too got my marching orders. But, one pock-faced stick-thin boy listened intently to Violet. He never took his eyes off her until she had recounted all of last night's dream. Neither did he shift his position on the floor, or get slowly up to sneak off sideways, pale faced. No, Bad Eye Bob held his ground until Violet stared at him, as if saying, 'that's it,' whereupon he continued to stare back at *her* until *she* felt uncomfortable.

The pair struck up an unlikely friendship, their only commonality being exchanging mawkish, chilling nightmares, without regard for any poor unfortunate who happened to be near. Robert leered at them, jumped into their vision when they least expected it, causing some of them to scream, or try to stifle one at least, if the teacher looked over towards the fidgety leafed tree, which whispered in all the right places as the story unfolded. Red-haired, freckle-faced Robert, with one of his grey eyes that focussed somewhere beyond you, disconcertingly, would laugh his ghastly grizzle at appropriate places. Like the one where a little girl was being chased by a Bogey Man round her house when her parents had popped out. Violet hissed when, she said, last night, the 'Thing' caught up with the petrified girl, threw her over his bony black-caped

shoulder and stuffed her under her own bed, with metal claw-fingers that he poked back under the bed to tell where she was. He told her he would be back tomorrow night and she must be where he had left her or else…that was when Violet rasped out a strangled yelp and Robert boomed into any kid's ear who was near enough, making them rush straight off, squealing to the teacher that the eejit Robert O'Hanlon had just tried to 'bust my ear-drum, Miss.' Other times, he would bend his finger bones almost to breaking point then do a double-jointed cracking move to dislocate his thumb. Crazy.

'Aw, come on, little sis. Come over here now and listen.' At a look from Violet, Robert would approach to man-handle me or a friend and try to push us onto the bench, but he always failed miserably, as I was stronger than I looked and determined to keep a safe distance. I was starting to feel that my once 'nice' sister, usually reliable and sensible, was becoming someone, some*thing,* else, aided by that creep Robert. I would catch the pair of them staring at me and my friends sometimes, not speaking for what felt like an age, until we were so uneasy, we left them to it. Robert said that Violet and he could throw anyone they liked 'into a blue funk' if they wanted to. Violet, he said, had taught him how to have nightmares. He would saunter past, then quickly whip around, and grab a lock of hair or the end of your nose, promising he would will you to have a 'really really triple horrific fright night that would boil yer blood and make you yell blue murder, except no-one would hear you 'cos they'd all gone off and left ya,…*never comin' back*…' he snarled for good measure, if he considered you didn't seem bothered enough. Violet was always in the background, gazing admiringly at him out of smug green eyes, gone into what she called a 'torpor', a semi-paralysed state, whilst he capered on the fringe of the circle, in the green-fronded shadow.

They smirked if anyone gave cheek or wandered

off, issuing warnings after them about sleeping 'with one eye open and one leg over the side, cowardy cowardy so you are,' and such-like, 'if you know what's good for ya.' These utterances started as idle threats, but I realised there was a momentum building, if slowly, to the whole 'dream deal'. Our parents were completely 'in the dark' about any goings on in connection with their dear daughter's somnambulant habits. I thought it best, at this stage anyway, to keep the status quo. They had their own problems, so they hardly noticed what *we* got up to. Violet said I should keep my mouth shut about anything I saw or heard, both in and out of school. When she and Robert gave me the 'stare,' I guessed it would be another wise thing to do. Some kids had been permanently affected by that 'look'. When *I* tried to do it, they just laughed in my face. So what was it about the scare pair? They were becoming more and more tuned in to each other by the day.

They even began to dream the same dreams, a worrying turn. I told Violet as much, but she dismissed my concerns with a toss of her long auburn pony tail, mumbling that I was probably only jealous that I didn't have such a close friend. I certainly did give thanks to my God that I didn't have *that* particular one. Especially, as Robert had taken on his favourite persona by this time in his dreams. He told everyone it was …he waited while the younger kids eyes grew rounder…a werewolf. In unison, there was a sharp intake of breath. Violet, she told them, was…they stared again,…a vampire, well, a *vampiress,* really. In a coven known as the Gangrel, who lived deep underground, sleeping in holes with so much security you'd swear it was Fort Knox. They were suitably impressed. One or two sidled off, saying they had to be home or some other tame excuse. The rest spread into the spaces they left, preparing to stick around, hoping for more. They were never disappointed. Although one small boy asked to see the holes, but was told these hole positions changed

every day, er, night, so that was not possible. He looked so crestfallen that my sister offered to come and get him out of bed one night to meet another Gangrel. He declined to answer and kept his head down after that.

Both Robert and my sister loved to ratchet up the tension as they competed with each other for the most petrified responses. Vi's face contorted until even her side teeth were like cracked dagger points. Just when we thought it couldn't get any scarier, her side-kick steamed in, so the gasps became louder and hissier. I was on the edge of the circle usually, watching my sister, an actress, lapping it all up. And Robert was the perfect foil, when he told *his* stories of the night. He said he was from a hunting pack called Ordo Dracul. As he said this, his long bony fingers curled round hers and I could have sworn they were claws; well, looked like it, anyhow. Trick of the light, I suppose. He would creep along the ground then suddenly rear up, on his 'back legs' to howl blood-curdlingly at the sky. That's when a few more left the groupie circle, so only the die-hards were left. And one or two of those didn't look so sure of themselves either.

Violet told us all one day she had dreamed that Robert had appeared in it, up to his werewolf tricks and suddenly found out that Robert had seen *her,* the vampiress Vayrona, as she called herself, lurking in the shadows of *his* dream. Another strange twist I wasn't too happy about. They were both rapidly gaining more and more control over each other's dreams as well as their lives. Again, I told her my fears, like, 'don't let all this take you over'…no response. Neither from Creep-Bob when I said as much to him. He only stared at me. I was considering hinting to our parents, but decided that after all, she was the eldest. I wouldn't be listened to. It had happened to me before. I had been told to, 'stop fussing, dear, Vi can look after herself,' and Mother had smiled more to herself than to me. The scare pair thought it amazing that each could chase the other

around in their own dream; 'yeh, and a well-proper nightmare seeing you in mine, so it is,' Violet told Robert, laughing. 'Ditto,' he would reply.

The others begged to be told about these stories. Once, Eileen McCarthy got so freaked that she pulled at her silver necklace with the cross, making it shoot off, scattering bits everywhere. Immediately, a petrified Vi and Robert sprang to their feet screaming, 'pick it up, someone, pick it up…*take it awayeeee*…'Their genuine terrified response was so rapid, it left all of us in shock for a few minutes. No-one spoke until one kid dared to pipe up, 'what was that crack about then?' But the pair were nowhere to be seen and we all drifted off, wondering. I still think I was the only one to continue wondering long after the others had stopped. That's the way it was. All to do with flesh and blood, and all that stuff. So I did what I always did - kept my mouth shut. 'Very wise, dear, very wise'…I heard Father in my head.

Over time, Robert started to pull away from their meetings, saying he was becoming bored of it all. He just wished Vi would be 'normal' and not be in the 'other world with those serious weirdos.' Vi told him to keep away if that was his opinion. So he did. Well, that is in the real world.

It was early evening on a wild night in November. The sky threatened rain out of purpled lavender clouds gathering on the horizon and a full yellow moon slid out from a layer of tissue paper cloud. Vi and I were exchanging stories, curled up on the rug in her room. Of course, hers were much better than mine. Especially the dream she had had the previous night. "Best ever, sis," she said. I would reserve judgement. She continued, her eyes shining in the light from the moon through the window,

"Listen. Picture this, a flash of lightning." I sprawled comfortably in front of her, as she used her eyes, her hands, arms and whole body to tell the story. Sometimes, she almost went into a semi-trance. I

wondered if this would be one of those times. Extra scary for those who could stay the course.

"Well, after the flash, and here's the weird thing, it's like I knew I was dreaming. Anyway, the thunder exploded and I took cover amongst some strange granite tomb stones where loads of my sister vampires were waiting for me. They had long black hair, red eyes and sharp fangs. My God, Vi, they bared them in my face when I first saw them. And the strange light was a bloodglare all round us. It was amazing, sis. Some were…close your ears now if you're squeamish …drinking blood…yeh, really…from our Mother's teapot and cups like their thirst was unquenchable. And we became friends in the dream. Friends, real friends. We flew Vi, yes, flew over strange volcanic landscapes, and on and on…in long black hooded capes, over mountains, into towns. They liked me, Vi, they really liked me, I've never had so many friends in my life before, I never wanted to wake up, and then…"

"Yes? Then?" I was gripped, but she had stopped.

"Then, it happened, in the middle of my party with them and all the other shape shifters rising from their graves, that Creep Robert rose out of one tomb. All that hairy fur and claws and teeth like…hideous yellow daggers. He grabbed me and kept pulling me back down with him, screaming at me to come home, come home…and…"

"And?" Her face looked so deathly pale as she told me.

"I didn't want him near me, I was having a good time, but he kept on and on, pulling, pulling, I hit him and hit him…yelling all the time, leave me alone, until…"

"Oh, God…yes? Yes?"

"One of the vampires shoved a pointed stake of wood towards me…she made me, she made me…"

"Made you what, for pity's sake, Vi?"

"Made me…stick it through his heart. I stabbed

and stabbed and stabbed…and all that blood…the way he looked at me…"

"Yes, ok, ok. And what then?"

"He was howling for what felt like a life-time, a terrible noise, then he slipped down under the earth. Actually, Maudie…" She waited for effect.

"I loved it. That feeling I got when that eejit went silent. Maybe they'll let me do it all over again." She shut her eyes and lay prone. I was going to get no more from her that night. I stole back to my bed.

"Class 6, I want you all to listen carefully now. I'm afraid I have some bad news today. Our young friend Robert O' Hanlon has…" She stopped. We all waited.

"Well, he has had an accident. This morning, on the way to school on his bicycle, he went too fast down the hill and…" Miss Grant wetted her lips as if her words were gagging her dry mouth.

"Did he hurt hisself, Miss cos I've done that before and…" She looked at the child who stopped speaking and fiddled with his pencil.

"Er, yes, yes, he did, Tom, he did. In fact…Robert will not be coming to school any more as…"

"Has he moved, Miss? We were going to move but my Dad…" She shook her head at Niamh, who looked down.

"Yes, I suppose you could say he has moved, Niamh. To heaven to be with God. He cycled too fast and the bike ran away with him. A piece of the fence that stuck out er…impaled him straight through his heart. I'm so so sorry, everyone."

One child screamed, others started crying, Terence Kelly asked her what impaled meant. At break-time, I told Vi what my teacher had said. She just looked blankly back at me and I knew what I had to do. What I've always done for her all my life. Blood's thicker than water, well, isn't it? You see, nowadays, both my

sister *and* me are happy, very happy. Our Mother is so pleased.

Yesterday, I met Ethlyn McCarthy on the Common. I practised giving her the stare. I liked it when she turned and started running. I followed her.

THE LEFT-OVER KID

Yeh, yeh. Come right in, pal. Get outta that slappin' shit rain. Sidown, sidown.

Ok, grab a beer, no, no, you're welcome, friend. It's not much, as they say, but it's where I hang my hat.'

Anyhows, like I was just sayin', the left-over kid's what they called me. Everywhere I went when I was growin' up in Iowa. Folks who saw me hangin' round the back doors of them oily eatin' holes. Yeh, all the bleary-eyed, half-baked cafe owners, keen to shut up shop for the night, 'ceptin' the twenty four hour guys. Ya know, get home to a few cans and a late night horror with whichever woman was there. Cops? Yeh, cops wandering them midnight alleyways, all fizzin' with cobalt and lime neon. Yeh, they'd nod in my direction with a raised eyebrow so I knew. 'The left-over kid, see him? Over there. 'Hey, you! Lenny Loser.' That's who I was. Furritin' in bins like my life depended on it. Well, let me tell ya, it did. It was cold enough there in winter to 'freeze the balls offa codfish' as my ol' man used to tell me when I asked him 'bout temperatures an' all.' I studied these things when I was that age and he used to tell me 'studyin' gets a fella nowhere' and that I should get my 'soft lily-white hands dirty.' Told me they were the hands of 'a pale no-good widow' an' then he'd stomp off in his cracked leather jack-boots, 'to man's labour, son.'

What did he do? Moved buildings. Yep. That's what I said. The best buildin' mover ever there was. Well, in the United States of America, and maybe, probably, the world too. He could, with his teama guys, move any place off its jackass to anywhere. Anywhere that was viable, which was always somewhere. What a guy. Momma would have a dozen kittens every time he said he was 'in the middle of a 'Big Baby'.' She always anticipated how stressed he would become 'til that 'baby'

was finished. He said, 'no need to get so high Ma, you know. Hydraulics, that's how I was born. 'Came outa my dear Mom, Lord rest her soul, by hydraulics and possibly a jack or two,' and he would laugh so loud our dog would howl like a huntin' timber wolf and then he'd josh Momma for worritin' until she calmed down and smiled again.

I remember one time, I'd be 'bout nine I s'ppose, when my Dad moved a church from one sida Davenport to the other. The priests said if they couldn't get the congregation to come to *them,* they'd move the church to the congregation. So that's how it came to be said that my Pop could move heaven on earth. It took a whole lotta ingenuity to make *that* one happen. Not without its traumas though. One of which was the spire took down power lines for miles around, so half the County's electrics were cut off in minus 30 degrees which tended to upset a few folk round here. Swore they would never set foot in church worship again if this is how God repaid a favour and that my Dad should watch himself messin' with the good Lord's buildin's an all, or somethin' worse might happen. Pop thrived on the notoriety, I think, 'cos he always just smiled and told 'em his God moved in mysterious ways, includin' by wheels, and hydraulics if He so desired. The best one? Let me see. I'd say when he had to take a mansion over the rail track. That baby involved holdin' up half the county for two hours in total while they manoeuvred that place, layin' ramps and usin' all the wheels they had on the 'dollies' that fitted underneath. Yep. All done to plan. Perfect. And a freight train with six wagons held up waitin' on 'em. That was some cheer that went up, I can tell ya. Folk used to shout to my Pa, 'here comes The Man that Moves Buildins' and that's how he was known. Mom secretly liked it but she never told him. I think he knew we all did.

Momma? Well, she tolerated Dad's work. Knew it paid the bills. And it didn't pay to fire him up or he

would go off on what he called a 'decoratin' trip' which meant he went out and got plastered. 'Don't look to annoy a bull if you can find another way round the critter'. That was her motto so her and Pa worked. In ways. In others, not. She once chased him half way to Minnesota with his own twelve bore for comin' back so blind drunk he'd mistaken their bedroom for the lavvy and peed in the laundry basket. I remember me an' my brother Sam watchin' from a safe distance, Ma whoopin' after him as he ran, pants round his ankles all the way down to the river, 'bout a quarter mile, where she forced him into it and told him to duck his pea-brained head in it 'til it cooled him off. I tell ya, he was a real sorry sight traipsin' back up the dusty road, still on the wrong enda that ole gun and Ma diggin' it in his heavin' ribcage if he slowed down. He never did it again to my knowledge. That was the only time I saw Ma get the stingin' hornets up towards Pa. Yeh, Louisa May an' Davey John Patterson, my good parents. Still alive? Hell no. Many a year gone now. God rest their souls.

Louisa May was a great lady. Her feisty spirit died the day Pa got ill, years on. A light flicked off in her heart. She said she'd stay on the earth without him only for as long as it took the Lord to find a place for her near the ole varmint. And that wasn't to be long. She took bad six months later with a headache she said felt like a million tin miners were chisellin' in there. It got to be a massive stroke. Felled her like she was an oak tree in a storm. So there we were, Sammy and me, like orphans he said, and told me he was leavin' for a while to get his head together. I never saw him again. I suppose that's when I started on a spiral down to become the left-over Kid. We didn't have any other relatives who mighta taken us in. I figured I'd be ok but times was harder'n a cowpoke's handshake and bad folk crawled outta the woodwork as you wouldn't believe. No excuses mind. I knew it was all down to me.

Like when I learned the lesson 'bout not judgin' a

book by its cover. Shoulda got *that* one by fifteen but then Ma used to say I had to 'take the long way round to find out what was common gump in the first place'. It was little Sheena Sawyer that started it off. A book cover if I ever saw one. A *real* page turner. Sheena was somethin' else in them days. She looked like she herself had invented butter. You know, the meltin' kind. Strawberry-fair hair that water-falled down her back and caught the lights when she swished it all in your direction. Which was often. And skin. Skin that'd make a peach look rough. She smelled of spearmint gum then spat it as far as she could when the taste had gone. Which I later found out was what happened to her guys. Sheena said she'd something to show me one day and I should meet her when the sun dropped. I was there almost before she had done givin' me directions. She looked drop dead wonderful when I saw her and I wondered why she was there on time 'stead of half an hour late, like I'd heard she did to other dates. Anyways, I soon found out when I realised she hadn't come alone. Her cronies were ranged around under the trees lookin' like they'd come to be entertained. Well, they had, and yep, you've guessed it. By us. Well, more to the point, by yours truly.

Sheena Sawyer had set me up to be slit like a herrin' and the bones scraped by wild cats. Now, I didn't fancy that idea; call me King Coward if ya will. Nope. I was havin' to access the ole grey cells faster than a hungry coyote. I'd seen two or three of those guys before; Ezra Talbot and Lewis Lightnin' Brodewski and they'd never struck me as if helpin' old ladies was their forte, you get my drift? Smilin' was somethin' so alien to this bunch, it was as likely as they'd be sellin' flowers to grannies. Oh, and Wally Wombat. He was the one that used to jump ya. A real skin 'n bone weasel if I remember right. You met one? The sort that's like a damn cat – there one time you look, then gone the next when your back's turned. Yep, you got the picture, pal.

Anyways, where was I?

Oh, yeh, sure, sure. Help yerself.

Well, there they were and there I was. Tell the truth, I wished a hole would've opened in the ground. Anyways, I figured the best way to beat a bear when it's right there in fronta ya is to face it square on an' look it in the eye.

Wally stepped up first, aheada Ezra. Lewis stayed back to mop up on the bones. The others chewed gum and waited. Sheena sat cross-legged, half-hidden under the tree, playin' with her hair. Wally spoke first.

'This little lady here says you can whop anybody for her. Now, that's some claim, buddy. Is it true I'm askin' myself.' Wombat stuck his weasel face into mine.

'Yeh, kid. What is it they call ya, huh? Sumthin' 'bout left-overs? Well, if you can't back up that claima yours, that's what'll *you'll* be, son of a bitch. It's my great friend Ezra here who's gotta claim on this little lady here. You've guessed it. Us guys is all here behind him.'

Wally shut up then when Ezra signalled a cut across his own throat with an index finger. Wombat sleazed back into the shadow. Well, I suddenly recalled a fact from way back when, which was this. Ezra hated dogs. Big and small. And they would smell it on him so they hated *him*. One took a real exception to him and when he sneered in its direction, teasin' it rotten, it had enough and went for that cuss; took a hold of his arm and worried the life outa it. God have mercy, Ezra was screamin' like a stuck pig an' tryin' to shake the manic crittur offa him. It held on like a rabid thing and bit him real hard before it let go. There was blood runnin' all over and Ez runnin' in circles, tryin' to kick the dog which only made it madder. Anyways, what I'm getting' to is that from there on in Ez always had a weak right arm and I knew it, 'cos I saw the whole thing.

So when he came toward me, I knew what I wanted to do. Struck me a first blow to my chest that

winded me, he did. That fired me up. I threw a mean cut across his ribs'n seized a god-given chance. I'd positioned myself and him just where I wanted to be 'cos when he threw a right hook, I grabbed that arm, pulled him hard towards me, jumped to the side and watched him hit a tree with his own momentum. He cannon-balled into it full on with the front of his stupid head. My god, it was worth it all to watch that sucker go down like a twister outa the blue. He lay unconscious for a few seconds I suppose, then he was clutchin' his skull with the pain. His face was spoutin' blood from everywhere. I just kept the pressure comin', doin' nothin' more than stand there while he was beggin' for mercy. Well, ya know, I'd had my fun and the rest of 'em were backin' away from a face-off, buncha yella bellies. I think they didn't reckon on messin' with a judo champ anymore. I'd surprised myself. Just acted it like I did it all the time. 'Next?' I asked.

I waited. No-one spoke. Why? Well, my friend, the main reason bein' they had vamoosed and Ezra walkin' after 'em, holdin' his arm with one hand and stemmin' the blood from his nose with the other, moanin' 'bout havin' the mother of all headaches and tellin' me to sleep with one eye open from now on. I'm still waitin'.

Sheena? She'd bin one of the first to hightail it and last I heard she'd taken up with a trucker name 'a Crusha Layton and they moved away to Denver.

That goddam rain, eh? Hear it, slammin on the porch. Yer wouldn't put a rat out, huh?

Now, don't get me wrong, life wasn't all bad back then. I'd be lying if I said it was. There was a time when it let go its hold on my throat and I ducked outa the searchlight. Let's say, I crawled along in the shadow of the wall, for a while. Jumped offa the carousel, so to speak, into calmer waters. That's when I met Angelina. Lina as she liked to be called, 'for obvious reasons' she'd say, and give ya that look. Lina was the kinda girl that made a guy feel a million dollars when she looked a

certain way. She flashed her smile. Gifted by an angel and it made ya glad you was a guy. She had this smell of wild flowers about her. Poutin' lips stained like blueberries and her eyes kinda fixed ya like glass lakes at midnight. Deep blue glass . Goddam it, Angelina was every good thing in triplicate, wrapped up with a golden bow. She used to tell me, 'we two have got it, Lenny, we two have got it,' and I never asked her what it was. I just wanted to stay thankful we had it and hang on to it.

Hey, hear that wind risin'? You ok for time, pal? Have another, yeh, go ahead.

Lina's family? Oh, god. Lina's folks gave her a hard time when she was growin' up in South Dakota. She moved away. Left her brothers to it soon as she damn well could. Her Momma was a two-bit, hey, no, a one-bit, whore, who worked the streets when her old man came in from a chain gang job, buildin' roads. Five of 'em; Mom, Dad, and Lina. She was the middla three. Two brothers she had. Push and Shove. Well, Den and Billy, but you get the picture. And they didn't mind who they did it to. Just about anybody that looked their way. A look would do it and it would finish up with the youngest baitin' the line, that'd be Billy and the eldest reelin' 'em in, then, after a helluva punch-up, botha them endin' up in a cell to cool off for the night. Lina sided with neither. Just told 'em they both deserved a whoppin' and it was peaceful when they'd gone.

She often said we could make it together. I sometimes sit an' wonder how my life mighta been different if we had. And hers. God knows, she deserved sumthin' better'n she got much later on but that's another story. Suffice it to say, I heard it said she struggled to bring up some mean bum's kids as well as two of her own, probably from another mean bum, for him only to beat her half stupid and leave her locked in a basement with nothin', while the kids screamed so loud up top of the house the neighbours thought she was killin' 'em so sent for the cops. She had to fight tooth an'

nail to get 'em back 'cos they all swore blind she was a bad Mom.

She used to say, 'you know, Lenny, I just feel in my waters somethin's gonna go wrong for me if I ever have kids. 'After all,' she'd say, with a sad smile that would melt a marble heart, 'who the hell have I had to teach *me*, eh, kid?' She'd call me that. Kid. On account of she was five years older'n me. But, hey, who's countin'? Them was the happiest times of my life spent hangin' loose with that girly. Like the day we two followed the river. Found a pool at the bottom of a waterfall. I recall it was a fierce hot green day. She just stood there tellin' me how bee-oo-tiful it all was before she suddenly stripped off and dived in, callin' me in with loud hollers and screams, on accounta she was so happy. We floated on our backs and watched electric shiny dragonflies loopin' the loop and listened to bull frogs mating. Nothin' to trouble us.

She said she'd never seen such water-lilies in her life. Big as dinner plates, believe me. And the water. Hung like a mercury curtain over them rocks. We swam an' floated 'til the sun dropped like an over-ripe water-melon and a golden harvest moon rose like a han'fulla glitter scattered on the water. 'Len', she laughed, 'see that water droppin' over them rocks? Well, it's like us two. Fizzin'. You know, we *fizz,* you and me, Lenny, an' don't you forget it, Bubble Boy.' And I never have. I never clap eyes on champagne much these days but when I do, I think of Angelina. An' in down-town coffee shops an all, warm and smellin' of roast beans, maple syrup and waffles. One time, we bought Knickerbocker Glories and she told me she wanted to be a dancer. 'A show dancer in New York, on Broadway, Lenny.' And me? I was to be her manager. Or maybe we'd run our own cocktail bar and serve up exotic soundin' drinks like The Mai Tai, The Side Car or The Sazerac to loaded folk who would tip us like dollars were goin' outta fashion. We had it all sussed. Lina wanted six kids; Florence,

Rosemarie, Abalone, Lenny Junior, Marshall and Jesse Joe. So did I but somethin', like life, got in the way. And she said she would sew stuff and tell 'em stories and we would all fly kites together and our girls would learn to sing and dance. I think Lina was happy back then. Proper happy. When Jacky Lee came along, much later, I suspect happiness was a luxury she couldn't afford.

One day, when the Spring rains were fallin' Angelina met me. Said she was havin' to move away. Somethin' about money problems. Her Mom had found out where she was, so she had to quit before the no-goods cleaned her out. I offered to help but she just left when my back was turned and that was the last I saw of her until I read about her in a newspaper a long time later. And it wasn't good on account of her meetin' up with Jacky the 'Fuse' Lee. He was the guy who invented 'em. Ya know. The short kind. He was built like a tank. And treated anything or anyone who got in his way with the same forward motion. Let's say, he was no slouch if a man built like the side of a house was what ya needed. How she got mixed up with that low-life I'll never know but Lina was a sucker for compliments and the Fuse was an ace at dishin' 'em.

Unlike *my* Pop who *moved* buildins', Jacky blew 'em up. Sky high. Used gelignite as if it were just like poppin' corn. He could detonate anything anywhere. I remember Jacky Lee once sayin' that blowin' buildins' is 'like sex. Comes on quick and watch it don't take ya by surprise', then he'd laugh like a silver-back gorilla callin' for a mate, Not many folks picked on Fuse Lee. Exceptin' me. Only the once. But it was worth it. I was watchin' close by when I heard him puttin' Lina down sumthin' rotten. Callin' her real insultin' names an all. I think his dinner was a minute late on the table. So I just walked straight up to that coward an' swung one right in his sweatin' pig-purple face. Busted his nose. God knows, I'll never know how. It was the look on his face *and* hers I never forgot. She never said a word tho'

just walked inside.

I think of Angelina most nights since she left. It only seems like yesterday but I know that's not true. I think of her when I look at the moon chalkin' the road 'cos she'd say, 'Lenny, you look at the moon at midnight and so will I, then we know we're doin' it together. That would be real nice. I'd like that.' So we did. It was a spooky feelin'. She said the moon gave us all our moods accordin' to it waxin' and wanin' in a month. She talked about bio-rhythms an' all. She believed in that planet stuff, and what-not. And she learned how to read the cards and palms. Oh, and scrying. What's that? I think that was usin' mirrors to see into the future or back into the past. Sometimes she used crystals or gemstones. Always said she couldn't see too far ahead for us. She told me, 'see the way the moon pulls them tides, Len? What else do ya know like that, huh?' She loved water. Loved the fact that two thirds of the earth is covered by it. Yeh, Angelina just loved life.

Two years back, I read Lina drowned in a deep pool somewhere and one boy-child left screamin' on the bank. So the paper said. Misadventure or sumthin'.

'You still awake? 'Scuse me pal. I gotta see who in hell's name can be knockin' on my door this tima night. Hey, hey! I'm comin'. Stop that almighty bangin', will ya! Let me get these bolts off. Yeh, yeh, hang loose, whoever you are!'

'Hi. You can put that thing away you know', it's a fine welcome hey, old man?...Lenny Junior…Pleased ta meet ya.'…How ya doin?' Pop?'

'Well, if it isn't the left-over kid standin' right here on my doorstep. My left-over kid, huh? Oh, God…is that right?'

'Whatever that means, Pop. I sure am.'

'Lord have mercy. I'll explain later. The past is a mighty Big Country…

'Come on in, son. Yeh, go through, go through. My company in there is just goin'.'

'Hey friend, listen up. Goddam him if this ere's not my son, Lenny Junior.'

'Er, thanks for the company, pal. Sorry fer whisperin' but hey, blood's thicker'n water, I'm sure ya'll understand.'

'What's that? How can I be sure, ya say? Take a look at those blue eyes my friend. I just nearly drowned in them lakes.'

THE WRONG 'UN

Only three days since he'd gone on the run. It already felt like a lifetime but too early for the media to have the detail covered yet. It would take a week for them to wake up if he knew the plods. On the run. He'd always thought about that when he was a spotty little kid. Thought it sounded a crack, cool thing to do. He'd considered becoming a fugitive when he was seven. His Mam had shouted at him so evilly once, it seemed like the only thing to do. Not 'run away'. That smacked of cissy. No, go 'on the run'. That was better. Fugitive. He'd heard that word on TV. Not too long after that, his Dad became one himself. Disappeared after a fight in a pub, when he'd bottled a bloke's face for a remark about his Mam. Totally lost it and stabbed another fatally who joined in. It took a month for the cops to persuade him to hand himself in. Mam said she never knew he loved her enough to do that. He's still cooling off in prison and she visits him regular. None of the rest of the family have spoken to each other again over the past twenty years. Families? Over-rated. They always let you down. Never really gave a stuff unless there was something in it for them. He had a mate who was serving time at present. Sam would help him if he cared to call a favour in. There were ways. The slammer taught them.

God, he was bloody cold. He'd dossed on an old flea-ridden, damp mattress in this barn by a dense wooded hillside last night. He knew he'd have to move on. One night. One place. That would be his rule. He *must* stick to it. Deviations from his plan would not do. He had a system. Of sorts. Complacency must not creep in. Not an option. He knew where there was a storm drain that ran for a mile or so inland.

It was his partner's new boyfriend's throwaway shout that had finally snapped him. Despite everything in the past, he'd loved his Pa. Flesh and blood, thicker

than water, an' all that. No one knew how much. Ma included. Jodie his girl-friend, had let him down now. She was a lousy liar. Her and that sleazy scum bag Larry Armitage. He'd tried it on once too often with Jodie. He'd given her fair warning of what would happen if Smarmy Armi didn't back off. He didn't. She up and left, took his son and shacked up with Doughball Lazzer. So one night, he'd gone round and sorted him out, given the bum both barrels when he answered the door and legged it like a greyhound on speed. Simple as that. Jodie, the poor cow, had shopped him straight away. Said the baby hadn't stopped crying since. Guilt-tripped him. He'd read that in a paper he'd stolen from an out of the way sweet shop when the owner was on the phone out the back. He must admit it nearly worked. A great kid but…enough was enough. He'd also managed to grab a bar of chocolate, a can of Coke and at the last second, and a black baseball cap on a stand by the door, ramming it tightly over his too distinctive bleached hair cut.

Later, he'd never known a simple bar of milk and dark taste so good before. Same as the dawn chorus. Never even heard it until now. Those goddam birds sang their tiny hearts out. He envied them their joy in living. At this moment, he'd have swapped places with a bloody bird. He checked the early evening sky and smelled rain on the wind. So far, the days had been hot. It was mid-summer. But it looked like a change was on the way. God, he was hungry and thirsty. Time to move on soon. Under protection of darkness. It had worked this far. All part of his system.

His head began to sear his eyes with red pain as he pulled himself off the wet, mud-caked, slimy barn floor. He swatted a bluebottle as it settled on his arm. Not dead yet, sonny Fly-Boy. He clutched at his head. He had to get a drink. Same shop? Maybe not. The cops would soon be all over the place like maggots on a dead dog. Use your brain, bro. Find another.

He slid out before sniffing the air and scanning the scene like a lion out on the Plains. Then it would be back like a non-existent shadow person. His headache had turned migrainous by now. Hell. Pills were what was needed. And a warm shower and…so many things in ordinary life he had taken for granted. Freedom was the Big One. But this was OK, wasn't it? Better than the slammer, Well…wasn't it?

He looked through a crack in the dry stone wall. Squeezed himself flat to the sodden wet ground while a worm crawled over his hand. What freedom? That was hours earlier. And he had heard the first whine of sirens, seen two sniffer dogs pass across a neighbouring field too close for comfort. He could hear the drone of a helicopter. The noise drilled into his head. He was feverish. A feeling of total claustrophobia took him over. Another hedge to move beside. Another alleyway to press himself flat to the shadows in. They would run him out like a holed animal. But, OK. Let them all try. He'd got what it takes. Show the lotta them. Fifteen minutes of fame. Isn't that what they said? Fame was addictive. He dragged himself to his aching feet and began edging slowly towards the main path, down to the heart of the village, doorway to porch-way. If he didn't find at least a drink again, he would pass out in this filth hole. He had to dodge in and out of shadows; behind a parked car; between a garage and a tiny shed when he thought he heard someone coming. Easy. Another one cheated, although the stray dog that had stared at him had freaked him out until it dashed away.

See… He still had The Spirit. Idiots, the lot of them. He could still keep a few paces ahead. The average Joe Public was *so* unobservant. Too busy thinking about the next thing in their ant hill existences. And, as for the old Bill, he spat twice into the dust. When he looked ahead, he suddenly realised his worst nightmare was unrolling. A few hundred yards down the road, a police officer with a plain clothes mate

was walking towards him. His legs jellied out of their moulds and he saw in a split second his best way forward to a more lenient Judge in an inevitable trial, He pulled the cap down tighter over his eyes, OK. Game up. No more confusion. He'd been deluding himself, the last three days, yeh? Hadn't he? Here. Right now. *Do it.* Hell. Just *do* it, goddam it. He stood in front of the by now level officer, lowered his head and offered his wrists in a peace sign. This Policeman turned to look at his mate. The pair began laughing.

'Oh, yeh! Very funny mate. The party hasn't started yet. Only trying this lot on before we go! Ain't that right Chief Super Andy, Plain Clothes Division? Come with us. Gate crash, eh? Simon don't mind. Forget the fancy dress. You can come along hand-cuffed to me. Hey, more the merrier. Look like you could do with a bit of a laugh tonight eh? Free booze, they'll all be half cut anyway. Come on…yeh?…Whattya say?'

TLC

We, that's my sister and I, always visit her every Saturday – same time, prompt, never earlier, never later. It's our routine you see. That's how it's always been for at least ten years. We're expected at 2 p.m. and we don't want to upset the routine. Marilyn and I wouldn't have it any other way and we know mother wouldn't. She isn't too far away. Marilyn says we should walk. She's becoming quite a health freak of late, always saying the fresh air and exercise will 'do us good' so we've been walking, during the Summer months. But now that Autumn has arrived, I fancy we may start taking the bus more often. If Marilyn doesn't want to, I'll catch one and meet her there. I like to 'do my own thing' as mother said once. 'Always wilful, was Marjorie, a tomboy when she was young, you know. Much rather climb trees, Marjorie would, than play with her dolls! Chalk and cheese, my daughters!'

Marilyn was what mother used to describe as 'a different kettle of fish.' My sister has always been more 'tuned-in' to fashion and all its accessories than I have ever been. More 'with it' they used to call it, in the sixties. She was certainly never without any of the latest shades of colour. If psychedelic orange was the 'thing' with a kipper tie and knee-high, white patent boots, then Marilyn would be wearing them. We're both retired now. She used to be 'something in advertising' in the city and myself, I worked in social care for the elderly. My sister has never spoken to anyone over the years about her job, although she does tell mother about it on our Saturday visits.

Much of what she says is news to me as well. She tells her at the same time as she is re-doing her make-up, or combing her hair. Marilyn says that even if it doesn't cheer mother up, doing the make-up helps to make *her* feel better anyway. Mother never objects, so I'm happy to let her do it. It certainly does wonders for

mother, although, as Marilyn pointed out, last week, 'you can only do so much in the time that we spend with her,' and that 'miracles would take much longer!'

Today, when we visited, we walked and took red poppies for Armistice day. It turned out to be a clear blue day, with crisp red-gold and lemon coloured leaves piled all around on grass verges beside the path. A day mother once called 'one out of the bag,' before the onset of Winter, years ago. We stopped off at the chemists as Marilyn wanted to buy a new fashion shade of lipstick and matching nail varnish for mother, Lincoln Park After Dark, I think it's called. I thought it might be a step too far as a fashion statement for mother, but I reserved my judgement at the time, and it turned out to be the perfect choice, because mother was looking particularly pale today. Passage of time I suppose.

We never trouble that she doesn't come to open the door for us, we're only too happy to let ourselves in. Whilst Marilyn carefully applied the new polish to her nails and gloss to her lips, she pointed out to mother that this was the very latest colour by Dior. Mother never commented. She won't remember Dior, so Marilyn just carried on with her 'makeover.' Extra TLC I said, which made us both smile. Mother never objects. That's how she's always been, 'easy going' as she often reminded us when we got into a sisterly feud.

'Why can't the pair of you be more like me, take a leaf out of my book?' mother would say, 'instead of following in your father's footsteps.'

She used to tell Marilyn not to let me bully her. Dad just called it 'spirited' and commented that he liked a 'feisty' woman so that was his contribution to the family genes. He's long gone now. He ran off with a woman up the road who must have had some high spirits of her own, as a friend of the family told mother they'd seen the pair of them in a 'compromising' situation on top of the number 16 bus late one Saturday night during the miner's strike. Mother threw his bags

out on to the road, and told us it was his 'last' bus as far as she was concerned. She never mentioned him again and although we took our lead from her, on cold dark nights, or whilst riding on top of a bus, I sometimes still think of him. Mother has certainly never felt the need to marry again, although she once told us in the past that a town clerk at the local council offices used to 'carry a torch' for her. He was 'pipped at the post' by our father, who asked her to a local dance just before the clerk had got his act together. I couldn't help thinking about mother needing the clerk's 'torch' during the miner's strike. Where was he then? Would it have changed the outcome, made father sit up and take notice. Who knows!

While Marilyn worked on hands and lips for mother today, I couldn't help noticing her skin looked parched, so after applying lots of moisturiser, I used some foundation, American Dream, to improve her poor pallor. The effect was one of both lifting her skin tone and highlighting her prominent cheek bones.

Friends have told us that they have never known such devoted daughters and can't imagine their own would ever do the same for them. We just say that we can't imagine doing anything else for our mother, a mother who has given us everything, a mother who still deserves nothing but the best. She would never admit it, but she has always liked us to make a fuss of her. We have, however, been letting her down for a while now, in respect of 'the best' when it comes to flowers. I said as much to Marilyn a month ago.

'We should really try to change out her artificial flowers for fresh ones, once in a while.'

I keep having to dust them and once Marilyn even took them home to put them in her dish-washer. She said it wouldn't hurt the plastic. I had to admit it did help to brighten them up for a while, but today they looked grimy as ever. I have resolved to change them for the silk variety at the least, 'as these look just like the

real thing.' Mum's words, when she once bought some for Aunt Josephine, one of the most house-proud women you could ever know. Anyway, Josephine was so pleased with her gift from mother, that she never stopped mentioning them every time she saw her for the next twenty years, until mother said she wished she'd just 'let it be.' Marilyn said she did it because she would have liked to be given some more, but mother never did take the hint. The poor old dear's dead and gone long since now. Mother's last gift was a wreath of silk flowers at her cremation.

As mother said, 'fresh flowers are wasted. Silk ones are just the job, in the circumstances.'

When Marilyn finished her nails and lip colour, and I'd attended to her facial complexion, we chatted for a while about the week's happenings, since our last visit. Marilyn told me before we set off to see mother today, that she was worried she may have to start spending more time at the weekend on her garden, before the winter set in, as her voluntary work and writing course, both of which she had recently embarked upon in retirement, were taking up most of her time during the week. She was half suggesting that I might go to visit mother on my own, do without her on some Saturdays, whilst she caught up. I said I'd give it some thought, but I couldn't help thinking privately that I needed her support on the visits which I would find daunting on my own. Although I was sure that there was no chance of mother complaining, I began to get the feeling that before too long I would be going to see her on my own more and more often. Family and friends were becoming concerned that we should both be devoting ourselves to mother at the expense of living our own lives.

Perhaps Marilyn had begun to take notice of this advice lately. I told her that I would always keep my Saturdays at 2.00 pm, for mother, and she should do what her conscience told her. She said, maybe she had

been listening to her conscience for too long and that maybe it was coming to the time when she was going to put herself first for a change. Be that as it may, we both still cared for mother and I told her I would go on my own if needs be, but I might not stay for too long.

As we caught up on various topics of interest for that week, we listened to music, something suitable to 'soothe the troubled breast' as mother always said when I had had a particularly trying day at work and had called in for 'the cup that cheers,' on my way home. While the music played and I brushed her sparse hair, Marilyn and I said nothing. I am sure we were both remembering when mother used to go to her favourite hairdresser's twice a week to let Suzanne 'work her magic.' It was grey now, but it had retained its colour until she was almost eighty. Father used to say it was her 'crowning glory.' Marilyn used to brush it through with mother sitting outside on a chair, the sun giving it golden glints. She would sit there until Marilyn had brushed it with a hundred strokes, before bustling back into the house, saying she had 'better things to do with her time.'

We had been with her for over an hour today when Marilyn announced that she had to get back for an appointment, I knew she was beginning her new policy of claiming her time. Mother was unaffected by her daughter's sudden announcement of a quick departure. I went along with it but I knew she would always be there. I would speak to her. It would be alright. We both got up awkwardly. At the same time, I noticed Marilyn take a half-guilty look back as we said our goodbyes, went to the door and waved to mother as we always do.

Passing the office window, I heard Graham's voice. "Off early today ladies? Don't worry, I'll sort her out. See you next week. Take care!"

Glancing back, I watched as Graham went to fasten down the coffin lid and push it slowly back into the undertaker's deep freeze. I heard him whistling

softly to himself as he banged the door shut. It's *his* routine, you see.

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

A mean dog crept past, hunger in its eyes, fear its only companion. The hot breeze riffled a plastic bead curtain whenever it remembered, which wasn't often. Heat burned off stones as if to emulate hell. Mac fished a drowning fly from his warm beer and took a side-long glance at her.

Wina's hair water-falled like liquefied honey. Long sticky strands hung over her face so he couldn't see her expression. But he guessed at it. He couldn't really blame her. Dumped by a stranger in a pick-up at this bar earlier that day, to be told there were no trains until tomorrow, meant they were stuck in the god-forsaken place for longer, with all its irritants; crawling, flying, stinging insect life and poisonous snakes that spat from the woodwork when least expected. And then there was old Mama Carrita who served drinks. She, like the snakes, appeared when they were looking the other way. Her black tasselled shawl draped across her heaving bosom, was tied under the promontory, which gave her the appearance of a trussed turkey cock, waiting for Christmas. Her long skirt swept the dusty floor, revealing only dirty yellow toe-nails, which she repeatedly stubbed, in her shuffling progress between the three or four tables. She hissed curses between rotting teeth. A smell of fried onions and garlic clung to her clothes and her dyed red hair resembled an angry cockscomb. She had one black glass eye which missed nothing. Mac felt something move on his foot. He kicked out at it. It gave a squeal as if being killed and leapt for its ninth life. Mama's mangy cat. She appeared at the sound and her one eye met Mac's two. He looked into the empty socket where the other should have been.

"Hey…you donta lika my pets, Mr Maccy?"

"Oh, sure, grandma. Cutest moggie I ever saw. Thought it was a snake, ya understand."

"Huh? Think you'da better come to Mama for your lessons to tella the difference, yeh?" She twisted her mouth in her version of a smile.

"Sure. I know, Ma. Sorry. Just a jittery day, you know."

"You anda that friend of yours, you getta some rest tonight before the train is arrive, Mr Mac? OK, OK?" and she pushed through the beads into the darkness behind.

Her cat had vanished and the dog was now lying, head between paws, eyeing them up.

"Sorry, gal. Looks like we're here a while longa."

"Hell, yeh, looks like it, don' it?" and Win flicked hair out of her eyes.

"Next train, early mornin', I think the old girl said."

"Yep," and the dog whined in his sleep.

It should never have happened the way it did, she thought. They'd been robbed blind. Woken up two days ago in a rest room to find they'd been mugged whilst they slept. Must have been disturbed. Luckily, nothing else gone. Mac had kept some notes in a hidden pocket of his back-pack. But not much. Nearly skint, in this foreign dust bowl. She remembered a certain smell of vanilla baccy had lingered afterwards. Not like Mac's smokes at all. They had legged it. Following the river, for a mile or two, they crashed out that night under a shack of rust-eaten corrugated iron. The cash they had was under Mac's shirt, his hand on top, until first light, when they were woken by the grinding noise of a tip-lorry, scattering a gatling gun-fire of small stones on top of the iron roof as it passed. Now, a day later, they had wound up here; hot, tired and waiting for a train.

"No, senora, no train today. But tomorrow, ok, ok yes, tomorrow," and Mama's eye had looked up the track, opposite the bar, as if she thought she heard something in the distance. A mad cockerel screeched and two skinny hens scattered, their five beady eyes on

a lump of mouldy bread she threw down, before she dragged back into the gloom; Mama's cockerel was blind in one eye.

"Another drink?" Wina asked.

"No, ta. That old crone freaks me. She's lookin' through those mingin' beads, honest. Take a peek."

"I believe ya, gal. Don't let her get to you."

"You're right, I guess. But let's go. Oh, my god…that freaky eye…"

Mac stubbed the ciggy under the right toe of his dusty Montana, picked up the bag and she followed him towards the rented room. As they climbed the splintered wooden steps, the wind rose, blowing in from the direction of the rail track. Wina shivered and kicked the wonky door shut. She had the feeling that Mama's eye was looking through the key hole; but…no. She finally went out cold.

Mac was shaking her awake at five o'clock. Twenty minutes later, and two cups of Mama's mud coffee, they were standing on the station platform. The Big Heat was already building. A lightning-quick gekko shot out from under a rock and disappeared into a crack in the crumbling wall. It was then she noticed.

"Hey, see what I see?"

"And what do you see, gal? I'm lookin'."

"Grass."

"Grass. Yep, grass."

"Long grass. See? Between the rails, Maccy boy. And what does *that* say?"

"I dunno. What? It's early, Win," and he yawned.

"Grass means no train today. No trains…ever." As they thought about this, Mama Carrita and a tall guy in greasy leathers stood by the rails. She pointed a bent finger at them.

"Leave this to me Ma…Hey! Listen, mister," the guy shouted. "There ain't no trains around here. Haven't bin for nigh on fifty years. Nor the next fifty neither." He pushed back his stetson and spat into the parched

grass, before rolling a smoker.

Mac spoke. “Now, look, buddy. We’ve no money. We got robbed. Two days back. In Tiger Creek.”

“Aw, hey, then how comes you can pay for drinks and a room with Ma, eh? And hows about that pretty friend of yours, huh? Neat jacket, and them Montanas, sonny? Well, well, well, now.” He sneered, and kicked dust up. Blowing a smoke ring, he swaggered towards them. Wina smelled vanilla.

Down the track, the yellow grasses whistled and his mean dog peed on the wall.

Two weeks later, when back-packing honey-mooners Davey and Becca were dropped off at Carrita’s, Davey’s newspaper headlined:

MYSTERY OF COUPLE MISSING ON HOLIDAY AT SPRING ROCK.

“What did that sign say, back there?” Becca asked, but she already knew the answer.

“Don’t worry, Becs. There’s a train outta here at first light. Relax. Another drink?”

The tall grasses whispered and a beady eye stared through the swaying curtain.

TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

"For God's sake, this silence is killing me, my Sleeping Beauty. You know, I could get used to it, honey."

Calvin spoke light-heartedly to his wife, Verna, as he drove their coughing, spluttering old Chrysler along the street they jokingly called their neighbourhood. Anything less like neighbours he couldn't imagine. The goddam lotta them thought Community Spirit could be purchased at the discount wine store, five dollars a bottle.

'Wouldn't piss on you if you was aflame, son,' his old man would say, when he visited, now long dead. His Ma had told Pop if *he* was halfway friendly, then *they* may be different. Fred was a bullish hot-head. No subtlety there. Never had been. And, like father, like son. Ma always gave folk the benefit of the doubt, dear soul. She too had passed on to the Great Mall in the sky, only a year after the old boy. Calvin really missed her. Not a man to talk about his feelings, he had told no-one. Not even Verna. Especially not Verna. Anything less like his Ma he couldn't imagine.

Calvin crunched the gears with a grating sound that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to prickle like a dog's. Deeana Whinlatter was clipping her hedge for the tenth time that day. Her clippers were like her tongue, he couldn't help thinking. Always snapping up and down. And sharp too. Oh, yes. *He* knew that. She turned to watch them go by, then click-clack-click…

"Nosey old bitch," Calvin hissed between clenched teeth, outwardly smiling, cheesily towards his neighbour. Verna's eyes were closed.

"Well, I'm sorry darlin", but she is," and he made a pig-face when he'd passed.

"Always gripin', that woman. Morning 'til night. No wonder Tommy escaped to the 'Garage in the sky'

years ago. Mind you, old girl, I couldn't help wondering at the time if he wasn't helped on his way. Inconclusive, they said at the post-mortem. Umm…" and Calvin sped toward Verna's favourite beauty spot, Kincaid Bridge, not too far out of town.

He'd been promising to take her out there for a few weeks and today was her birthday. He picked up the quickest route which would take them from the sprawling suburbs, with the pink stucco raised houses and dark veranda porches, past a leafy park or two and on past down-town busier side-walks. Folk were still sitting at tables and a smell of charcoal and gasoline came in through the car's half-open window. He pushed his foot down harder and assured Verna, 'not too long now, my Chicken Licken.' He was fast leaving the ugly late fifties condominiums behind; the littered alleyways and peeking eyes from upstairs windows. He felt less claustrophobic. Almost liberated.

Bowling along Piedmont Third Avenue, toward 2nd Boulevard, in the easy silence, Calvin noticed Verna was leaning towards him on the front red leather bench seat at an angle that could be dangerous, as she may snarl up the gears and hand brake so he took one hand off the steering wheel and pushed her gently away. She gave a grunt as he eased her along the bench.

"That's better, ol gal, just gettin' you all apply-pie comfy."

That was her trouble. She *always* had to be comfortable. *Always* .No matter what, where or when. She could be comfortable now anyhow, at the lush riverside. He lit a ciggy for the last two miles and threw it out as Kincaid Climb began to work its way up to the Bridge, past endless lines of sentinel poplars that sent the light flashing beside his eyes, and giving him the beginnings of a migraine. Verna usually complained about smoke in the car. Today, she didn't. Feeling slightly groggy, he pulled the car over and parked up in a low-lit, sun-speared area of bushes and trees, a way off

the main highway and opened his own door to listen to the confluence of the two rivers mixing and mashing far below. A drop of maybe hundred and fifty feet. It was a froth torrent today, looking all the more beautiful in the fast fading light, as the last rays blistered the flow of the water, and a smell of moist wild undergrowth and damp pine needles with eucalyptus wafted up. Calvin felt strangely content and Julie London sang, 'Cry me a river,' from the car radio.

At last. Made it to her long-promised spot. After last night, this was a tonic. Just as he was about to get out, he suddenly had second thoughts. *He* felt like a rest himself after the drive. His head was gritty and he could use some shut-eye. Yes, he would rest for an hour or so. They wouldn't be disturbed here. And later, it would look even more magical. Like that time he and Verna had visited the park, lit with multi-coloured fairy lights strung in the bushes and the sound of a running water feature. Yes. Like that…peaceful… Dark would be better all round…yes…It was an hour and a half later that he started awake in the cooler air. He got out to take a look over the stone bridge. Perfect. And not a soul for miles around. The highway was quiet, with only the odd whine of a climbing vehicle, changing gear, faint in the far distance.

'Hey. Now show a leg, Vee, honey pie…ooo…eee…we're here,' and he pulled open the passenger door. Grasping her legs firmly, Calvin eased Verna out of the car. She gave another grunt of escaping air. His wife was a dead weight. Her legs were mottled with veins like after-dinner blue cheese. She lay on the wet grass as if she were dead to the world. Which indeed, she was. One argument and a hundred moans later last night, she had made it so *very* easy for him. Sick and tired, tired and sick and tired, sick and …she'd never stopped for three hours. He recalled now that his head had gone twang and he'd given her all of his not-to-be-sniffed at strength with the paper-weight her Mom

had given them. Her favourite in the collection-the one with the suspended Emperor Dragonfly with its lapis lazuli iridescent wings. Her eyes had rolled round and then back in her head, like two of her miniature paperweights, before she went down. A fallen cold Druid monument in a stone circle. All so quick. All so easy. Now, he was carrying her, with that same strength, to her last resting place. Just a simple shove. Calvin had it figured the river would do the rest. After all, she was an Aquarian.

He managed to hump her over his wide quarter-back baseball shoulders and carried her towards the middle of the bridge. He urged himself on, sweat beads watering the giant red poppies on Verna's cotton dress, her special occasions frock. He smiled to himself.

"There now, honey," and he propped her on the bridge, smoothing her cottony dyed hair, murmuring and nodding to her inert body every now and then He had always been a good actor at High School. Then, without any warning, Verna swayed. First sideways and then wobbled until she began to fall back from his hold. Oh God. Yes. She was going. Calvin could hold Vee's skirt no longer. It ripped like thin tissue and he watched, as his wife fell two hundred feet into the waiting water. It felt like she was falling for hours.

At that moment, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a young woman slowly walking towards him with her dog, from the shade at the opposite side of the bridge. Hell, in the shape of a dozen steel prison bars, stared him in the face. Her dog was two steps in front. Calvin, in shock, went through three options as she approached. He could make a run for it and hope she had never seen anything but that was unlikely, considering her proximity a minute ago; he could push *her* to her death as-well but he quickly ruled this out, as she had a large dog with her that could turn nasty. It dawned on him that his only real option now, if he wasn't to face life behind bars in the State Pen, was to

join Verna. The cool river appealed to Calvin, compared to the claustrophobia when they slammed that door…nothing for it but to jump. One more look and he was convinced. She was on her mobile phone. That meant only one thing. The cops were probably on their way right now. Oh, God. He thought he could hear the wail of a siren already. Or was it the wind? His heart pumped weirdly. The woman's footsteps were level with him. Just before he plummeted, he registered one last conscious thought As his own world went black, he saw the lady had a white stick. She kept walking, tapping, tapping, the sound of it mixing with a splash of cappuchino-creamy cascade below, as she disappeared from view at the other side. Her guide dog piddled on the back bumper of Calvin's Chrysler and led her on obediently, tongue lolling out in a sideways smile. Calvin's car radio still crackled faintly, as Frank Sinatra crooned, 'My Way,'

"Yes, Mom."
"No, Mom."
"Sure, Mom."
"I will…yes…stop worrying, Mom."
"No…no-one will…no…nothing happens round here, Mom. See you soon. Bye for now."

Far below, the river smacked its rabid lips. Downstream, two dragonflies hovered and zipped over the deep, darkening water.